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UPSTAGING *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*: AFRICAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATIONS OF
SLAVERY BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

by

Heather Lee Cooper

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in History in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Leslie A. Schwalm

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a social and cultural history about the ways that African Americans contributed to national debates about race, slavery, and emancipation by constructing and performing their own representations of slavery for the public. Scholars often portray these larger debates as a contest of ideas among whites, but African Americans played an important and still understudied role in shaping the white public's understandings of race and slavery throughout the nineteenth century, especially in the North. Moving from the 1830s to the early 1900s, my dissertation identifies several critical moments when African Americans, especially former slaves, gained new access to the public stage and seized opportunities to represent their own identities, histories, and experiences in different forums.

Chapter One focuses on the unique contribution that fugitive slave activists made to the abolition movement. I place the published slave narratives in a larger performative context that includes public appearances and speeches; singing and dramatic readings; and oral testimony given in more private settings. In contrast to the sympathetic but frequently disempowering rhetoric of white abolitionists, fugitive activists used their performances to construct a positive representation of black manhood and womanhood that showed slaves not as benevolent objects in need of rescue but as strong men and women ready to enter freedom on equal terms.

Chapter Two focuses on the Civil War, when runaway slaves had new opportunities to communicate their understandings of slavery and freedom to the Northerners who sent south during the war, as soldiers, missionaries, and aid

workers. “Contraband” slaves’ testimony revealed the prevalence of violence and family separation, as well as slaves’ willingness to endure great hardship in pursuit of freedom. Contraband men and women also worked to publicly assert their new identities as freedpeople when they preemptively claimed the rights of citizenship and power over their own bodies. Their testimony and actions challenged white Northerners to embrace emancipation as an explicit Union war aim.

Chapter Three of my dissertation examines black performance on the formal stage, 1865-1890s, by focusing on three groups of black performers: African American minstrels, the Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Capitalizing on Northerners’ increased interest in slavery and “authentic” black performers, these groups offered their own representations of slavery and emancipation to the public, sometimes disrupting whites’ romanticized image of the “old plantation” in the process. During an era when the country moved toward reconciliation and reunion, these performances kept the issue of slavery before the public and, in some cases, contributed to an emancipationist memory of the war which challenged contemporary Northerners to protect the rights of freedpeople.

My final chapter focuses on the autobiographies written and published by formerly enslaved women post-1865. My analysis of the women’s narratives as a body of work challenges the prevailing notion that post-bellum slave narratives were focused on regional reconciliation and the writer’s successful life in freedom. Women writers continued to remember and represent slavery as a brutal institution and revealed the ways that it continued to shape their lives in freedom, challenging contemporary images of the “old plantation” and devoted, self-sacrificing “Mammy.”

Through their writing, these women represented African American women as central actors in stories of resistance, survival, and self-emancipation.

With sustained attention to the deeply gendered nature of these representations, my dissertation sheds new light on the unique ways that African American women participated in these larger social debates and contributed to the public's understanding of race and slavery before, during, and after the Civil War. Moving beyond the traditional periodization of U.S. slavery and emancipation and the typical focus on actors within a single, organized social movement, my project uncovers the breadth and diversity of African Americans' public representations of slavery and freedom in contexts that were simultaneously social, cultural, and political. Using a broad range of published and unpublished archival materials, my work reveals African Americans' distinct contribution to national debates regarding slavery's place in the nation and the future of the men and women held within it.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a cultural touchstone for the American public's understanding of slavery in the nineteenth century. Scholars have spent a great deal of time examining white-authored representations of slavery as a critical site for constructing ideas about race, but the ways that African Americans contributed to this discourse with their own representations of slavery remains far less explored. African Americans created their own public representations of race, slavery, and emancipation throughout the nineteenth century. These representations took a variety of forms, including written and spoken testimony about the slave experience, musical and theatrical representations of slavery and emancipation, and public displays and assertions of African Americans' new status as freedpeople during and after the Civil War. I examine the work that representations performed in particular historical contexts, including the antebellum abolition movement; the unfolding drama of the Civil War; and the post-bellum theater and literary marketplace. Entering a public sphere that was saturated with white-authored representations of slavery (including blackface minstrelsy, proslavery rhetoric, and romanticized images of the "old plantation"), African Americans' representations offered a critical counternarrative that emphasized enslaved people's humanity, capacity, resilience, and resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

If the color-line was the problem of the twentieth century, then one might say that slavery, so inextricably tied to race, was the problem of the nineteenth century.¹ Ideas about race, slavery, and African American freedom were repeatedly contested and (re)constructed throughout the nineteenth century – not only in the tumult of the American Civil War, but in the decades before and after. These debates played out in the social and cultural landscape, as well as the political and legal sphere. Symbolic, rhetorical, and performative representations and expositions of slavery not only engaged with but also helped to shape these larger public debates. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a pivotal example of how popular representations of slavery were part of these larger debates and remained meaningful even after the legal end of slavery in 1865. Following its publication in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a cultural touchstone for many Americans' understandings of slavery.² The novel painted a romanticized image of slave loyalty, self-sacrifice, and suffering in the sympathetic but ultimately powerless figure of Uncle Tom. Stowe relied on racial stereotypes and "negro dialect" in her representation of most African American characters. Although she portrayed the cruelty of some slave

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 1.

² The novel sold 300,000 copies in the first year of its publication. See Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 4.

owners in the figure of Simon Legree, most of her representations of slaveowners were more sympathetic portraits of kindhearted men and women who were caught up in a bad system. Indeed, Stowe actually hoped that the book would appeal to and change the minds of some white southerners and purposefully tried to represent those characters in a way that suggested redemption was possible.³ The novel's and subsequent plays' representations of slavery were problematic, but did succeed in creating greater sympathy for and interest in the cause of slaves and fugitive slaves in the North.

Stowe's story had a wide impact. The book was adapted for the formal stage by multiple authors and theater companies; its characters became staples in minstrel sketches; its images were printed on game cards, handkerchiefs, and china sets.⁴ Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* partly in response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, but the novel was arguably even more important than that piece of legislation in widening the sectional divide. Scholars acknowledge the powerful effect that the novel and subsequent theatrical adaptations had on many white northerners, reaching hearts and minds that may not have been convinced by previous antislavery arguments. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also a point of contention for white southerners, inspiring over 30 "anti-Tom" novels which offered a proslavery response to Stowe's work and antislavery rhetoric.

³ Manisha Sinha notes that Stowe "adopted the language of appeasement long deployed by antislavery gradualists and colonizationists" in its appeal to "the generous, noble-minded men and women of the South ...". Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 441.

⁴ Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 1-2.

Public interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did not abate following emancipation. Uncle Tom plays and variety shows in which the play and characters were the central feature proliferated in the postbellum decades, the plots and characters adapted to fit different needs. A recent study notes that, in 1912, Harriet Beecher Stowe's son estimated that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been performed 250,000 times since 1852. The novel and plays' continued popularity was undoubtedly related to a wave of nostalgia, the work's portrayal of an earlier time for new generations, and overall increased interest in depictions of the "old plantation" on stage. It is estimated that 20-50 Uncle Tom troupes toured the United States every year in the 1880s; by the 1890s, as many as 500 Uncle Tom companies were performing each year.⁵

Uncle Tom's Cabin and its many iterations have been the subject of multiple studies. As a representation of slavery that had cultural significance before and after the Civil War, it helps us understand some of the ways that the topic and image of slavery and slaves continued to matter post-emancipation. A number of studies of the post-war South acknowledge that constructing a particular image and memory of slavery and slaves was also important to white southerners as they struggled to create a "useable past" and reconcile with the white North. Although studies of Civil War memory often argue that forgetting slavery was key to national reconciliation, it is clear that the South did not forget.⁶ The story of how African

⁵ David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 177-178.

⁶ For studies that examine how white southerners constructed an alternative image of the plantation past, see, for example: Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters:*

Americans *also* constructed and performed representations of slavery that stood to impact black and white audiences, before and after the war, remains largely untold and is a historiographic silence that my dissertation seeks to address.

This dissertation argues that African Americans also constructed and performed public representations of slavery before and after the Civil War, shaping larger debates and implicitly “speaking back” to some of the representations constructed by whites. If *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became one of northern whites’ cultural references for slavery, so did African American representations of the institution, such as fugitive slave Henry “Box” Brown’s antislavery panorama and the “slave songs” performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. I examine the representations they constructed in the context of the antebellum antislavery movement; during the Civil War; and when new opportunities for literary and theatrical representation were seized by African Americans in the several decades following emancipation. The basic timeline I’ve constructed above – antebellum resistance, Civil War, and post-emancipation – could easily be matched with the narrative “from slavery to freedom,” but for a few complications. First, many scholars have traditionally considered each of these historical moments separately. Only more recently have some scholars challenged the boundaries of periodization in order to show that the meanings of freedom and emancipation were negotiated over a longer period of time; that understanding slave relations with masters and mistresses is critical to understanding how both groups then responded to the Civil War; and that some of

The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

the same people who fought for black political rights in the antebellum era were also waging those battles during and after the war.⁷ Second, and most importantly, the historical narrative's focus on the movement "from slavery to freedom" has inadvertently led scholars to abandon the topic of "slavery" in post-war American culture. Even in studies of Civil War memory that necessarily "look back," the war and emancipation loom much larger than a memory of slavery itself. In his work on collective memories of the war, David Blight argues that public commemorations, monuments, and celebrations that focused on the war itself – remembering the heroism of soldiers and commemorating specific battles – tended to divert people's attention from the subject of what had *caused* the war.⁸ It is equally important to remind ourselves that celebrating *emancipation* (and slavery's end) was not the same as remembering slavery itself. Despite remaining relevant for studies of white Southern identity and memory, "slavery" largely disappears as a topic for scholars interested in African American history after the Civil War.

In "The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe," Jean Allman explores the ways that silences are produced in the historical and historiographical record. Allman argues that ignorance of particular actors, histories, and stories is not accidental, but

⁷ See the following examples of scholars who take a longer view of these processes, challenging traditional periodization that neatly divides the antebellum era, the Civil War, and post-emancipation into separate categories: Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); ; Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

⁸ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

constructed.⁹ Looking at agnotology, the cultural production of ignorance, “refocuses questions about ‘how we know’ to include questions about what we do not know, and why not.”¹⁰ Allman’s “discovery” of Hannah Kudjoe in the archival records revealed that, despite being virtually absent from the scholarly literature, Kudjoe “was arguably *the* leading woman nationalist in post-World War II Ghana, and certainly the first to assume a prominent and sustained public role in the struggle for independence.”¹¹ How, Allman asks, did Kudjoe disappear from the nation’s narrative of independence and from scholarly consciousness?¹²

Allman argues that several factors contributed to Kudjoe’s disappearance. Kudjoe disappears from the documentary record after Nkrumah’s overthrow in 1966; many male leaders went on to be part of the new government, but Kudjoe did not; the personal papers of a number of leaders were destroyed under the new regime, but many of those male leaders constructed an alternative documentary record by writing memoirs, a tradition that did not exist for African women. Historians who then went to the existing body of male-authored sources to write about Ghanaian independence found little to no mention of Kudjoe. In his autobiographies and other published accounts of the period, Nkrumah identifies his

⁹ Jean Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 13-15.

¹⁰ Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3, quoted in Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe,” 15.

¹¹ Allman writes that Kudjoe was “the only woman to participate in the founding meeting of Ghana’s first mass nationalist party, the woman who single-handedly mobilized rallies (often illegally assembled) up and down the country, as she led the massive petition drive for the release of that very same ‘Big Six’ being honored and celebrated – Kwame Nkrumah, William Ofori-Atta, J. B. Danquah, Ako Adiei, Obstebi Lamptey, and Edward Akufo Addo.” See Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe,” 15.

¹² Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe,” 21.

male comrades, but never mentions Kudjoe by name – he refers to her, in passing, as an anonymous “female supporter.” Other male members of the Convention People’s Party also wrote memoirs in which they focused on the activities of other men and gave limited attention to women’s participation and contributions. Scholars who go to these sources to write about the movement have not questioned, but rather simply reproduced, women’s absence in the historical narrative.¹³ Allman’s study of Hannah Kudjoe helps us understand the way that both sources and the questions we bring to them shape the stories that scholars tell.¹⁴

My dissertation addresses another kind of historiographic silence in the literature on African Americans’ journey “from slavery to freedom.” Historians writing about the African American experience post-emancipation have primarily focused on the ways that former slaves claimed and experienced freedom. Much of

¹³ Allman quotes Susan Geiger, who identified and wrote about a similar process of “disappearing” women in the history of Tanzania’s independence movement. Geiger wrote, “... ‘Women’s political actions and history are ‘disappeared’ in a cumulative process whereby successive written accounts reinforce and echo the silence of previous ones.’” Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1977), 10, quoted in Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe,” 15.

¹⁴ Marisa J. Fuentes’s recent work, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, has also shaped my understanding of historiographic silences and distortions. Fuentes argues that the archival record for enslaved women in Barbados reproduces the violence and objectification which those documents recount; we can only produce different kinds of knowledge from the sources “if we apply the theoretical concerns of both cultural studies and critical historiography to documents and sources.” As an example, Fuentes points to the scholarship on African American slavery in the U.S. She notes that scholars in the 1960s and 1970s began to focus on slave resistance in order “to refute earlier depictions of the enslaved as passive and submissive.” But in emphasizing resistance, scholars tended to pay less attention to the brutality of slaves’ lives and to other ways that slaves responded to those conditions. Acknowledging both the trauma and violence endured and the ways that the enslaved resisted those conditions complicates the historical narrative because it does not allow us to represent slave suffering and slave resistance in either/or terms; but, as Fuentes argues, we can only understand the significance of slaves’ actions if we understand the crushing conditions they lived under. I argue that something similar has happened as a result of historians’ focus on how African Americans defined and asserted freedom post-emancipation. The focus on freedom has led many scholars to turn away from considering the ongoing significance of slavery in freedpeople’s memories and lives. See Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 5-8.

the scholarship on African American history prior to the Civil War is dominated by the history of slavery. In some ways, the legal end of slavery in 1865 *did* signal a fundamental change and rupture with that past. Emancipation, the transition to free labor, and new legal and political rights, among other things, have been the subject of important scholarly questions and debates. Yet, there seems to be an underlying assumption among historians that “slavery” has no place in stories about freedom, or claiming freedom. Some histories of African American memory acknowledge the complex relationship which African Americans had to the slave past and the challenges they faced in trying to incorporate it into a forward-looking history of racial progress. These scholars argue that African American Civil War memory focused primarily on emancipation and black men’s military participation and, over time, moved toward a greater emphasis on black progress since emancipation. Real attention to “slavery” is by and large absent in these studies and in the narratives they construct about African American memory.¹⁵

The narrative that my own work uncovers required asking a different question – about how African Americans continued to engage with slavery, in freedom – and looking at a different set of sources, as well as interrogating old sources in new ways, in order to find the answer. The first inkling of this project

¹⁵ For examples of Civil War memory studies that represent African American Civil War memory in this way, see: Blight, *Race and Reunion*; Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); William Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Leslie Schwalm is one of the few scholars to examine the ongoing significance of slavery in African American memories. See Schwalm, “‘Agonizing Groans of Mothers’ and ‘Slave-Scarred Veterans’: History, Commemoration, and Memoir in the Aftermath of Slavery,” in *Emancipation’s Diaspora*, 219-264.

was my desire to understand how fugitive slaves, like Frederick Douglass, who were active in the antislavery movement, negotiated the tension between their public personas as representative examples of slaves and the new identities they were trying to build as free people. What I found was that the tension between slavery and freedom did not require an either/or solution; and that former slaves did not respond to that tension in a simplistic way. Douglass and others could remember and represent their slave experience while still asserting new freedoms. They navigated this tension partly by making their own choices about how to represent slavery, slaves, and slave owners, often in ways that challenged the negative aspersions normally attached to slave status. Indeed, claiming the authority to represent slavery in their own ways and to engage the public with those representations was, in and of itself, part of how they staked and asserted their claims to freedom. Understanding that African American representations of slavery were also representations of race in the nineteenth-century U.S., I wondered whether and how African Americans might have continued to engage the public with representations of race at other times in the nineteenth century. Working from this idea of public representations and performance, I found that some African Americans continued to engage with the experience and memory of slavery, as part of their work in representing race and defining black freedom, even after the Civil War.

Constructing a timeline of black performance reveals that there were multiple “moments” in the nineteenth century when African Americans gained new access to the public stage in the context of implicit and explicit challenges to the

relationship between blackness and slavery. Although the Civil War is often taken as the defining moment of freedom for the enslaved in the U.S., there were in fact several critical periods over the course of the nineteenth century during which different groups of African Americans left bondage. Emancipation came – or was negotiated, purchased, fought for, or seized – to different people, at different times, under different circumstances. And each time it did, those involved had to renegotiate their relationship to slavery, to each other, and to the larger society. In the process, the meanings of blackness – so intimately tied to slavery in the minds of whites – also required reevaluation. In each of these moments, African Americans engaged in formal and informal performances which effectively represented “the race,” contributing to ideas about black manhood and womanhood that shaped identity as well as contemporary racial ideology.

The fact that slavery was a central issue throughout the nineteenth century – before *and* after the Civil War – helped to create opportunities for African Americans to enter national debates about race, slavery, and emancipation. In this dissertation, I identify several critical moments when African Americans gained new access to the public stage and to different venues for the representation of slavery and race. What emerges is a kind of timeline of a particular brand of black resistance, deeply tied to the experience, memory, and meaning of slavery. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the beginning of an organized, interracial movement for the immediate abolition of slavery helped push the slavery issue to center stage in the national consciousness. Abolitionists made full use of the new print culture and wrote and disseminated antislavery literature of every stripe to

anyone who would listen – *and* to those who would not, surreptitiously sending some literature south despite prohibitions by the postal service. Their efforts, strategies, and arguments were diverse, but one of the most important tasks they embarked on was educating northern whites about what slavery really was. Fugitive and former slaves in the North had the ability to speak about slavery and their experience in it in a way that no one else could. A small proportion of those who would normally have remained hidden for reasons of personal safety seized the opportunities provided by the organized antislavery movement to address the public and to speak on behalf of the race. We are most familiar with the published slave narratives that were such a critical part of abolition’s propaganda campaign, but fugitive and former slaves who claimed that identity and history engaged the public through multiple mediums. Based on a limited focus on certain published slave narratives, some scholars have argued that fugitive slaves who wrote or dictated narratives often lacked agency or control over their own representations and authorial choices.¹⁶ But looking at the broader range of their antislavery activities allows us to see that fugitive and former slaves engaged in a number of rhetorical performances and asserted the authority of their own experience to represent slavery to the public. Rather than simply being controlled and directed by paternalistic whites, fugitive activists laid claim to the antislavery stage in order to construct and perform their own representations of slavery for the public – in the

¹⁶ For example, see John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo*, no. 32 (Summer 1987): 482-515.

process, entering larger debates about race and the future of slavery and African Americans in the nation.

The Civil War offered another critical moment and venue for African Americans to engage the public on the issue of slavery. The debates over race, slavery, and emancipation took on a new urgency in the context of secession and civil war. As white northerners flooded the South – as soldiers, government and military officials, missionaries, teachers, and aid workers – slaves gained new access to an audience who was deeply interested in what they saw and heard in their encounters with “contraband” men and women. Prior to the war, only those slaves who successfully escaped, made their way north, and took on a public role in antislavery societies had the opportunity to talk to the public about their experience of slavery and engage those audiences with diverse representations. Now, thousands of slaves fled to and sought safety behind Union lines. Once there, they testified about their experience in slavery and what they endured in the process of escape. They also began to perform their own understandings of what freedom would mean, claiming control over their own bodies and self-display through politicized choices about dress and occupying public spaces previously closed to them in order to celebrate national events. The many white northerners who went south during the war recorded what they saw and heard and reported back to others in the North, disseminating those representations beyond the confines of the South.

Although often overlooked in the context of African Americans’ transition to freedom, African Americans seized new opportunities to engage the public with

representations of slavery after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The postbellum years saw two new venues open for African Americans to participate in continued debates about slavery and race: the theater and autobiography. White northerners' interest in slavery and "authentic" blacks actually increased in the wake of the emancipation, perhaps because of the increased contact which many northerners had with slaves and former slaves during and after the war. In the theater, African American performers seized this opportunity to assert their own authority to represent slavery and blackness on the stage in multiple mediums – minstrel shows, musical dramas, and renditions of jubilee songs. With the exception of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, not all of these performers were former slaves. But they adopted that role for the stage, asserting a racial authority to do so, and they engaged in performances that represented the slave experience.

Between 1866 and the early 1920s, former slaves also improvised a turn on the antebellum slave narrative. Sometimes described as "postbellum slave narratives" by literary scholars, these autobiographies defy easy categorization and do not share the common features of a "genre," as has been argued for their precursors. Yet, scholars' collection and designation of them as a body of literature despite their many differences, suggests that a comparison to the earlier form may be useful – they are a body of non-fiction writing, at least partly autobiographical in nature, written and published by individuals who were former slaves.

Approximately 40% of the narratives written in the postbellum era were by people who gained their freedom *before* the Civil War, suggesting that at least some of them were taking advantage of new opportunities to write their life stories that they did

not previously have access to. The other 60% were written by men and women who gained freedom in the context of the Civil War and chose to write their life stories, even without the political imperative of the antislavery movement. Much was different for these later writers. The fact that they were not writing and publishing their narratives in the context of the organized antislavery movement meant that they often wrote with their own purposes in mind, but also that they did not have the same network of support for publication, distribution, and promotion, or the same ready-made audience for their work. Unlike most of the authors of antebellum slave narratives, many of the postbellum writers produced their autobiographies after living as free people for a significant number of years; many had lived the majority of their lives as free men and women, rather than slaves. Slavery was one part of a longer life story, but it was nonetheless an experience which some of these authors gave significant attention to. Although it is impossible to know exactly why, significantly more women were able to write or dictate their autobiographies in the postbellum period: 13 women's narratives were published after the Civil War, compared to 5 women's narratives published in the antebellum era.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is possible that the smaller number of female authors for the antebellum era is related to the fact that enslaved women represented only a small percentage of successful runaways. Based on their analysis of over 2000 advertisements for runaway slaves, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger estimate that the typical runaway was a young male; 81% of those who were advertised as runaways were male. Yet, the six women's narratives published in the antebellum era only represent approximately 7% of all those published before the Civil War, a number that is not representative of the 19% of runaways that were female. Similarly, the 13 women who published autobiographies after the Civil War represent only 15% of the total number of postbellum slave narratives, and certainly well below the percentage of women in the former slave population as a whole. While a greater number of women succeeded in writing after the Civil War, these numbers still suggest that other factors were at work during both periods, in terms of men's choice and opportunity to write and publish slave narratives. See Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 209-210.

Before, during, and after emancipation, African Americans used the new opportunities and venues described above to inform and remind the larger public about what slavery meant, particularly in terms of individual experience. It may seem counterintuitive to think about how African Americans who were in the process of claiming and asserting new identities in freedom, continued to engage with and represent their lives as slaves – but they did. And these representations continued to matter because they entered a public sphere that was saturated with white-authored representations of slavery and slaves that often bore degrading and disempowering connotations. When African Americans, and former slaves especially, represented slavery, a much more complex picture of slaves emerged; one in which they were rendered as full human beings. Pushing past the sweeping statements and stereotypes, African Americans represented the experience of slavery in a way that acknowledged both what they suffered and the lives they built within it – the ways that they pushed back and resisted whites’ efforts to claim ownership over their bodies and lives. Representing something more than victimhood served to humanize slaves (and African Americans) in a way that simply creating sympathy for their abject condition could not. Re-creating that image of themselves (and blacks) as slaves was not a way of trapping themselves in the victim role or rendering themselves as powerless; their experience and history of slavery did not have to be abandoned or forgotten in order to move into freedom or assert identities as freedpeople.

“Race,” in North America, was constructed specifically in response to and as a justification for African enslavement. The two categories of race and slave were

virtually inseparable by the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The way African Americans represented the experience of slavery mattered, before and after emancipation, because of that association between slavery and blackness – pushing whites to recognize the humanity of slaves was pushing them to recognize the humanity of the race. Calling back to what was viewed, in some circles, as a history of degradation, former slaves did not inscribe themselves with that degradation – they fundamentally challenged the relationship between African American identity and the imposed status of “slave.” For, as slaves, they were not degraded – they were abused, their families were torn apart, their bodies were speculated and traded and extorted, their labor and their children were stolen. But in remembering these things, African Americans painted a picture of their tormentors, rather than themselves. In creating these representations, former slaves were, in effect, telling the public that slavery did not define them or their race, who had that status imposed upon them; rather, their representations said something about the inherent nature of white slave owners, who actively chose to engage in inhuman acts. Being an “outsider” was one of the things that defined slave status. Only in coming to understand that “other” as a fellow human being, to understand the past and experience that had shaped them as individuals, to understand the terms under

¹⁸ See, for example, Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); David Brion Davis, “The Origins of Anti-Black Racism in the New World,” in Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48-76; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology,” in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12-49.

which they were entering freedom, could whites imagine African Americans on equal terms.

Chapter One focuses on the public representations of slavery and race that fugitive and former slaves constructed in the context of the antebellum antislavery movement. As previously mentioned, an organized, interracial movement for the immediate abolition of slavery came together in the 1830s and engaged in important social and political work, advocating for the freedom and rights of enslaved men and women and free blacks. This chapter focuses on the work of several fugitive activists, who took on a public role in the antislavery movement on the basis of their personal history and experience as slaves. Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Craft, Henry “Box” Brown, and Harriet Jacobs all wrote and published slave narratives, but they each engaged the antislavery stage in multiple other ways. In fact, many of these particular actors honed the stories they would later write in their narratives in public appearances, speaking engagements, and performances, as well as other forms of testimony and writing, wherein they used their personal experiences to make larger arguments against the institution of slavery. Speaking from what they experienced and witnessed, fugitive activists drew attention to the traumas of slavery – violence, family separation, and sale – but also to the ways that they refused to let slavery define them completely. They humanized and created sympathy for slaves, but also rendered them something more than powerless victims.

Fugitive activists’ particular representations matter because they were contributing to a public culture that was saturated with various white-authored

representations of race and slavery, including white abolitionist propaganda, pro-slavery literature and arguments, sentimental white literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and whites in blackface on the minstrel stage. Although many scholars acknowledge the importance of fugitive slaves' testimony to the abolition movement, historians often take the details of their rhetoric and representations for granted. Chapter One provides a deeper context for fugitive activists' work by trying to understand the particular place they occupied as public representatives of the slave in a propaganda campaign that was largely organized by whites. The representations of slavery, slaves, and race which fugitive activists constructed become more meaningful when read in comparison to the more sweeping and often disempowering rhetoric of some white abolitionists. Looking at the breadth of fugitives' activism, as well as the ways that they negotiated their roles on the antislavery stage, helps us understand the ways that these men and women made choices about how to represent a more complex picture of the slave. The sources for Chapter One include the African American and antislavery press; antislavery records of organizations and individuals; published slave narratives; and the Black Abolitionist Papers.¹⁹

¹⁹ The Black Abolitionist Papers are a scholarly collection of documents related to the activities of African Americans who participated in the U.S. and transatlantic antislavery movement, 1830-1865. The collection brought together a wide range of documents from manuscript collections and newspapers, creating a central collection of black abolitionist records that were otherwise scattered. Nearly 14,000 documents were collected and microfilmed; a 5-volume edited collection of documents was also published in print. My work makes use of both the microfilm and published editions. For more about the nature of the collection, see C. Peter Ripley, "Editorial Statement," in *The United States, 1830-1856*, ed. C. Peter Ripley, et al, vol. 3 of *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), xxv-xxx [hereafter *BAP*, vol. 3].

Chapter Two focuses on the ways that slavery and freedom were represented by the formerly enslaved men and women who became known as “contraband” during the Civil War. Under the Union’s First and Second Confiscation Acts, slaves were included within the category of “contraband of war,” enemy property that was subject to seizure under certain conditions; “contraband” quickly became the primary referent for enslaved men, women, and children who sought protection behind Union lines.²⁰ Contrabands’ personal testimony and other acts of self-representation contributed to northern whites’ understanding of slavery, race, and emancipation during the Civil War years. In many ways, contrabands’ testimony and performances were a continuation of the kind of work that fugitive activists performed in the antislavery movement – but, now, a much larger number of slaves and former slaves had the opportunity to represent themselves and the institution. The historical context was also fundamentally different because slavery had finally and actually divided the nation, with the exception of the Border States; and emancipation was a much more eminent possibility. This chapter examines how contraband slaves represented their experiences of slavery and their expectations for freedom to the many white northerners who came south during the Civil War, as soldiers, government workers, teachers, missionaries, and aid workers. The

²⁰ The First Confiscation Act was passed in response to the actions of fugitive slaves in the South. Union General Benjamin Butler responded to the large number of fugitives who arrived at Fortress Monroe, seeking protection, by declaring them “contraband of war.” Congress later sanctioned his actions with the passage of the First Confiscation Act, which allowed the seizure of slaves being used directly to aid the rebellion; the actual legal status of human “contraband” remained undefined. The Second Confiscation Act was passed the following year and expanded the terms to allow the confiscation of any slave owned by a rebel, regardless of what labor they were engaged in, and declared all such persons free. These developments and the uncertain legal status of “contraband” are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. See Ira Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 20-41.

literature and print culture created by the abolition movement was readily transferred to a new set of publications that focused on freedpeople, carrying transplanted white northerners' observations home to a wider audience. Literature on the Civil War now widely accepts and argues that freedom was not a given and that the actions of slaves themselves constantly pushed the Union toward that end; however, slave flight and African American men's willingness to serve as soldiers remain the primary "actions" under consideration.²¹ This chapter draws attention to the fact that slaves did more than flee – the testimony they offered helped whites understand the reality of slavery and humanized and individualized the slave population, making a critical contribution to the larger public's views on emancipation. Flight pushed the government to respond with changes to law and military policy, but slave testimony did the equally important work of influencing public opinion. Contrabands' testimony about the prevalence of violence and family separation challenged northerners to recognize what they were allowing to continue if they maintained a policy of non-interference with slavery. At the same time, contraband asserted new rights and tried to publicly mark their new status as free people even as their liberty remained legally uncertain in the midst of war, challenging white northerners to expand their definitions of freedom. The large numbers of Northern women who went south during the war and worked in close contact with contraband women as teachers and aid workers means that the

²¹ See, for example, Freedmen and Southern Society Project, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ed. Ira Berlin, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982-).

sources for this chapter provide particular insight into contraband women's testimony and acts of self-representation, contributing to our larger understanding of enslaved women's wartime experience and transition to freedom. The research for this chapter is based primarily on the monthly newspapers and other records of freedmen's aid societies and the American Missionary Association, as well as the letters, diaries, and memoirs of individuals who went south during the war.²²

Chapter Three examines black performance on the formal stage in the first decades after the Civil War. I focus on three groups of black performers: African American minstrels, the Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company, and the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers. Capitalizing on white northerners' increased interest in slavery and "authentic" black performers, these groups offered their own representations of slavery and emancipation to the public. Historians who have focused on African Americans' new status and experience following the Civil War have not interrogated the ways that some African Americans continued to engage with their history and experience of slavery in public ways. Black performers exercised new freedoms by taking to the stage and claiming authority to represent slavery and the African American experience on stage. Chapter Three examines how each group of

²² Borrowing some of the organizational structure and membership of the antislavery movement, freedmen's aid societies were created during the Civil War in order to address the material and other needs of African American men, women, and children who were coming under Union protection in the South. Groups like the National Freedmen's Aid Association raised funds and material donations, sent individuals south to work with freedpeople in the contraband camps, and raised awareness about the experience and needs of the "contraband" through a range of publications. Many of these groups published monthly newspapers for their members and the larger public, which included reports on their activities, as well as letters, reports, and observations from people working in the South. The American Missionary Association was established in 1846 as an antislavery organization that was also dedicated to African American uplift through education and the promotion of Christian values. It played a significant role in freedmen's aid during and after the war; its monthly newspaper, the *American Missionary*, included similar reports from the field.

performers engaged with the history and memory of slavery in different ways, sometimes disrupting whites' romanticized image of the "old plantation" in the process. During an era when the country moved toward reconciliation and reunion, these performances kept the issue of slavery before the public and, in some cases, contributed to an emancipationist memory of the war which challenged contemporary Northerners to protect the rights of freedpeople. African American women have received relatively little attention as stage performers in the 1870s and 1880s, but my research on the Hyers Sisters and the Jubilee Singers shows the important ways that some African American women engaged with the memory of slavery and emancipation on the postbellum stage. Women's representations of slavery were especially important because they helped to reinsert African American women into narratives of emancipation and the Civil War, as well as memories of slave resistance and flight. Research for Chapter Three draws on playbills, song books, and other material in the Harvard Theater Collection, archival materials from Fisk University, and the local and national press.

Chapter Four focuses on the thirteen autobiographies written and published by formerly enslaved women post-1865. The authors of postbellum slave narratives asserted a public role and intervened in public discourse when they chose to write and publish their life stories. My analysis of the women's narratives as a body of work challenges the prevailing notion that postbellum slave narratives were focused on regional reconciliation and the writer's successful life in freedom. In writing their life stories, women made themselves central actors in stories of resistance and self-emancipation. These autobiographies also tied women's

individual experiences to a larger, national narrative regarding the memory of slavery and the Civil War and the debt owed to freedpeople. Women's postbellum slave narratives helped to preserve a memory of slavery and worked to sustain an emancipationist memory of the war in which African Americans and women were central actors. In addition to the thirteen women's narratives published post-1865, this chapter examines an equal number of male-authored postbellum slave narratives published during the same period in order to highlight the significance of the choices women made when they wrote about their experiences.

**CHAPTER ONE:
“LIVING EPISTLES FROM THE SOUTH”: FUGITIVE ACTIVISTS ON THE
ANTISLAVERY STAGE**

On August 27, 1863, the American-born fugitive slave William Craft sat listening to a lecture delivered at the Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. Dr. James Hunt, president of London’s Anthropological Society, was presenting his paper on *The Physical and Moral Characteristics of the Negro*. In his assessment of the African race, Dr. Hunt argued for its innate inferiority and rejected the idea that blacks’ intellectual and cultural capacity would be improved if only they were given more opportunity. On the contrary, he argued, “in nearly every case where they had become men of mark, they had European blood in their veins.”²³ After listening to the rest of the lecture, William Craft rose and addressed the audience from where he stood. Asserting that despite his mixed ancestry he was “black enough” to respond to Hunt’s paper, Craft recounted a fable which the lecture called to mind:

A lion and a man were walking together along the road, and disputing as to which of the two could claim to belong to the superior race. By and bye they came to a public house, the sign of which was a lion violently held down by a man. The man triumphantly pointed to this in confirmation of his superiority; but the lion sagely inquired *who painted the picture*.²⁴

²³ Document 96: Exchange by William Craft and Dr. James Hunt at the Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, 27 August 1863, in *The British Isles, 1830-1865*, ed. C. Peter Ripley, et al, vol. 1 of *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 539 [hereafter *BAP*, vol. 1].

²⁴ Document 96: Exchange by William Craft and Dr. James Hunt at the Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, 27 August 1863, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 540. Italics added.

Craft, already known to the audience from his work on the antislavery lecture circuit, used Aesop's fable to make a point which was critical to debates regarding slavery and race throughout the nineteenth century: it mattered deeply *who* was telling the story.²⁵

In the decades preceding the Civil War, black and white abolitionists worked to make slavery a publicly contested issue by organizing propaganda campaigns that involved public meetings and lectures as well as the publication of antislavery newspapers, tracts, and slave narratives. In addition to espousing moral and intellectual arguments about the corrupting influence of slavery on individuals, the church, and republican government, activists raised public awareness about the condition and treatment of slaves in order to communicate the inhumanity that resulted when one person held property in another. For northern audiences with vague and caricatured notions of slavery and slaves, abolitionists performed the important work of educating them about the realities of the institution and those held within it. While white activists could speak about the evils of slavery and the suffering of slaves in abstract and sweeping terms, black men and women who had

²⁵ With regard to William Craft's presence and notoriety in Britain, it is worth noting that the antebellum antislavery movement was transatlantic in nature. While Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and passed an act for the gradual emancipation of slaves in the West Indies in 1833, abolition continued to be a topic of public debate there throughout the nineteenth century as activists urged the public to take an interest in the persistence of slavery elsewhere and to consider the welfare of former slaves in the West Indies who transitioned to full freedom in 1838. As a new wing of abolitionists seeking immediate emancipation emerged in America in the 1830s, they increasingly looked to Britain as a positive example of emancipation achieved without violence and as a potential ally in the antislavery struggle. Creating an alliance with British activists and rallying the support of British citizens who had religious, social, and economic ties to southern slaveholders and cotton-producers was one step toward "building a moral cordon" against the South. See R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); C. Peter Ripley, "Introduction," in *BAP*, vol. 1, 3-5.

experienced bondage offered a particularly powerful testament against it. In the years leading up to the Civil War, fugitive slaves like Craft, as speakers on the antislavery lecture circuit and as writers of slave narratives, became an integral part of the abolitionist campaign directed at white audiences in the Northeastern and Midwestern U.S. and across the Atlantic in Britain.²⁶

This chapter examines one piece of a much larger and multi-faceted movement for the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Moral suasion and the public propaganda campaign which fugitive slave activists contributed to were of critical importance to the antislavery movement, but black and white abolitionists engaged in a range of social and political activism in the name of black freedom. While much of the scholarship on the antislavery movement has emphasized divisions among white and black activists, Manisha Sinha has more recently argued that black and white activism overlapped on virtually every antislavery issue and front and that historians' insistence on seeing black and white abolition as two separate movements prevents us from appreciating the degree of radical, interracial cooperation that existed. Sinha argues that focusing on the paternalism of white "bourgeois reformers" distracts us from the fact that slave resistance was at the heart of the movement.²⁷ Although she tells an integrated story, Sinha centers the

²⁶ In a number of cases, the transnational breadth of fugitives' careers was partly a result of their migration to Britain out of fear of recapture by slave-catchers in the U.S. Finding themselves in new circumstances, many transplanted fugitives who had been active in abolitionist circles in the U.S. became involved in British antislavery organizations and set about addressing and educating a new body of potential converts. See R. J. M. Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers: The Lives of Six Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 96-97; Ripley, "Introduction," in *BAP*, vol. 1, 3-5; Document 31: William Wells Brown to Frederick Douglass, 20 December 1850, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 239-241; Document 41: Speech by William Wells Brown, Delivered at the Hall of Commerce, London, England, 1 August 1851, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 285-286.

²⁷ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 1.

efforts of African Americans and argues that their actions, along with the actions and resistance of slaves and fugitive slaves, was at the forefront of the antislavery movement and was responsible for directing and shaping the overall campaign which white abolitionists also participated in. African American abolitionists created some of the first organizations to promote abolition and black rights; were active members and participants in interracial antislavery societies; organized separate black conventions to discuss and strategize; edited, published, and wrote a broad range of antislavery literature; organized and participated in antislavery conventions, protests, public meetings and demonstrations; organized societies specifically for the protection and assistance of fugitive slaves and free black victims of kidnapping; were instrumental in getting personal liberty laws passed in many northern states; and supported antislavery politics. Black abolitionists were not merely symbols in a white-led movement, or objects of benevolence; they were at the forefront of every antislavery initiative.

That being said, fugitive slaves – as individual actors and as a public “issue” – did occupy an important place in the movement. In his recent study of the Underground Railroad in New York City, Eric Foner argues that African Americans led the way in an interracial effort to assist and rescue fugitive slaves and those who were accused of being fugitives.²⁸ Although some abolitionists questioned whether the movement should direct funds and resources to assisting individual fugitives rather than concentrating their attack on the institution of slavery itself, assistance

²⁸ Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 19, 63-65, 77.

to fugitive slaves was an issue that brought together many different factions of the movement and pushed them in the direction of direct action and a greater militancy.²⁹ Manisha Sinha also gives special attention to the fugitive slave issue. Like Foner, she argues that the actions of fugitive slaves, more broadly, pushed the antislavery movement in new directions through their individual acts of rebellion – helping to create a spectacle that engaged the white North’s imagination and pushing more abolitionists to support and engage in direct action in assisting fugitives and defending the rights and security of free blacks who were vulnerable to kidnapping.³⁰ Although Foner acknowledges that fugitive slaves sometimes provided an infusion of new leadership for the movement, Sinha gives more detailed attention to the contributions of fugitive activists like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, whose published slave narratives had a powerful effect on readers and who went on to become major leaders and speakers on the lecture circuit. Sinha credits such fugitive slave figures as a new generation of abolitionist leaders in the 1850s and remarks on their accomplishment in creating a new “literature of resistance.”³¹ However, the scope of Sinha’s larger narrative project prevents her from making a close analysis of the writing, rhetoric, and public representations of slavery which fugitive activists contributed to the movement – or from considering that there were important differences in the images of slavery which white and black abolitionists produced.

²⁹ Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 19-20, 23, 186-187.

³⁰ Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 2-5, 381-385, 500-502.

³¹ Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 421-456.

In fact, an examination of white abolitionists' rhetoric and propaganda reveals that the literal and figurative images which they constructed of slaves often bore disempowering connotations. In their effort to garner sympathy with audiences who struggled to identify with the plight of an outcast group, many white abolitionists emphasized the worst aspects of slavery and the seemingly absolute degradation which resulted from it. On the one hand, it was a reasonable tactic to portray the suffering and victimization of the oppressed group which abolitionists hoped to raise support for; implicit in the spirit of benevolence was the idea of helping those who could not help themselves. On the other hand, the image of the slave which resulted was one which assumed his or her complete subjugation and degradation, reducing black men and women to brutish and "bleeding victims" entirely defined by their condition.³² White abolitionists not only argued that the system of slavery and the masters who wielded power created a degrading environment for slaves; they frequently argued that slaves were, in fact, degraded, lesser beings kept from their full humanity. While this condition was blamed on the institution and not on the inherent nature of the enslaved, repeated rhetorical association of slaves with brutes very likely made it difficult for audiences to imagine slaves, or the freed people they would become, as individuals with an equal capacity for achievement.³³ When fugitive slaves like William Craft took to the

³² *Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

³³ Following his experience with slaves and former slaves in the Civil War South, white abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson acknowledged and criticized abolitionists' tendency to assume that the slaves themselves were degraded. He wrote, "I cannot conceive what people at the North mean by speaking of the negroes as a bestial or brutal race. ... I learned to think that we abolitionists had underrated the suffering produced by slavery among the negroes, but had overrated the demoralization." Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* ([East Lansing, Mich.]: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 196.

antislavery stage, they did so in the context of whites' disempowering assumptions regarding slaves' incapacity for independence, traditional family life, and proper gender performance based on white middle-class standards.

Focusing on the public performances of Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Craft, Henry "Box" Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, this chapter argues that fugitive slave activists constructed more empowering images of slaves than their white counterparts by emphasizing the humanity, intelligence, and sensitivity which survived in the enslaved despite attempts to reduce them to a state of "mental and moral degradation."³⁴ Fugitive activists used their own lives in (and out of) slavery as positive evidence for blacks' self-sufficiency, courage, morality, and family values. They not only countered the image of slaves' utter degradation and helplessness, but also contributed to the positive construction of black manhood and womanhood through their own performances and representations of gender.³⁵ Fugitive activists defied the caricatured assumptions of minstrelsy and presented audiences with images of black men and women who were prepared to enter free society as equals. Their efforts to construct empowering images of enslaved men and women take on added importance when read against the backdrop of white-authored rhetoric and imagery; fugitives' representations of slaves' humanity, capacity, and morality were

³⁴ Circular of the Anti-slavery Convention of American Women for 1839 May, Philadelphia, PA, in *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in Philadelphia, May 1st, 2^d, and 3^d, 1839* (Merrihew and Thompson, Printers, Philadelphia, PA, 1839), 27.

³⁵ Carol Lasser employs a similar approach for analyzing the lives of African American women as abolitionist texts embodied in the performance of a racial and gendered identity. See Lasser, "Enacting Emancipation: African American Women Abolitionists at Oberlin College and the Quest for Empowerment, Equality, and Respectability," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 319-345.

not merely additive, but rather made a *distinct* contribution to antislavery's public propaganda campaign.

Fugitive slaves who served the movement as representatives of their former status may have initially gained access to an audience via their association with white abolitionists, but once they took the antislavery stage they articulated their own ideas about slavery and slaves. These men and women faced implicit and explicit challenges as they simultaneously occupied the roles of individual, witness, representative, and symbol. Although they found a place in the public forum because of the value placed on their actual experience of bondage, each of the fugitive activists examined in this chapter faced challenges to their authority to tell their own stories. From accusations of a fraudulent past to paternalistic judgments of their public performances, these activists dealt with a wide range of attempts to undermine their authority and control the ways in which their stories were told. While it is often difficult to uncover how activists felt about their public role, examining the constant challenges they had to negotiate and the ways in which they responded to them can tell us something about what it meant for them to be the slaves' representative in a dual sense. Uncovering the ways in which fugitive activists *experienced* the antislavery stage is critical for understanding the complexity and contentiousness of their relationship to the antislavery cause.

The full extent of fugitive slave activists' contributions to the movement has been overlooked partly because they do not fit neatly in a historiography that often

examines black and white abolitionists separately.³⁶ Histories that focus on a white-directed abolition movement often mention the contribution of fugitive slaves who began their public careers with dramatic tales of their own escape from slavery. Indeed, many historians acknowledge that fugitives had a uniquely powerful effect on audiences as they dramatized the trials of bondage and humanized the figure of the defenseless slave.³⁷ However, with the exception of Frederick Douglass, little critical attention has been given to the ways in which their careers moved past this initial phase. As blacks who used their public personas to perform their own constructions of race, gender, and slavery, they do not readily find a place in the narrative of white abolition. As individuals who worked in close cooperation with white abolitionists, addressed white audiences, and became symbols of the propaganda campaign, “Professional Fugitive[s]” have also received limited attention in histories of black abolition, which often focus on community struggle, the networking and activism which took place in informal spaces, and free blacks’ efforts to combat racism, discrimination, and segregation in the North.³⁸

³⁶ Prior to Manisha Sinha’s new work, much of the scholarship on the antislavery movement revealed a definite tendency to examine abolition in terms of separate spheres of black and white activism. Such an approach speaks to the “conceptual chasm” which Jane and William Pease argue separated the races within the movement, as blacks but not whites fully understood the different shades of oppression between slavery and freedom and approached the cause on a personal and concrete level. Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks’ Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Athenaeum, 1974), 3, 14.

³⁷ See, for example, James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), revised edition, 141-142; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 129-134; Larry Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 48 (1965): 196-204.

³⁸ Quote from Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement.” For this treatment of black abolition, see Peases, *They Who Would Be Free*; Lois E. Horton and James Oliver Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-*

Manisha Sinha's work challenges this divide and, most significantly, greatly expands our understanding of the depth and breadth of black antislavery activism. But in her effort to represent the movement as a radical, interracial campaign in which black and white abolitionists labored as equals, she downplays the racism and paternalism which white abolitionists sometimes displayed and the meaningful differences in blacks' and whites' relationship to the cause. However radical and integrated the movement may have been, it matters deeply that black abolitionists, unlike whites, were "seeking directly to meliorate their own condition and that of their group."³⁹ That reality not only made the stakes much higher for African Americans; it also shaped their relationship to and engagement with the public propaganda campaign. White abolitionists spoke about the slave as an "other;" black activists – and former slaves, in particular – were *themselves* the subjects of that propaganda.⁴⁰ A close analysis of the ways that white abolitionists and fugitive

1860 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Anne M. Boylan, "Benevolence and Antislavery Activity Among African American Women in New York and Boston, 1820-1840," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 119-137; Julie Winch, "You Have Talents—Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 101-118; and Carol V.R. George, "Widening the Circle: The Black Church and the Abolitionist Crusade, 1830-1860," in *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*, ed. Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 75-95.

³⁹ Writing in 1974 about black community activism, Jane and William Pease argued that abolitionist studies should actually recognize "two overlapping movements: One was a reform movement seeking to bring practice affecting others into harmony with previously defined ideological commitments; the other was a movement of activists seeking directly to meliorate their own condition and that of their group." While Sinha challenges this divide and argues that white abolitionists were engaged in something much more radical than moral reform, she does not address the important reality that abolition necessarily had a different meaning and significance for black activists. Peases, *They Who Would Be Free*, 15.

⁴⁰ Sinha conflates black and white abolitionists' representations of slavery and is critical of the many scholars, including Saidiya Hartman, who have been critical about the objectifying nature of some of that rhetoric and imagery. She writes, "The depictions of abused black bodies in abolitionist print culture, from slave narratives dripping with blood to abolitionist newspapers and pamphlets, has appeared to many scholars as bourgeois sentimentality, voyeuristic propaganda, and racist

slave activists' represented the slave experience and African American identity reveals that, even among one's allies, it mattered *who* was telling the story.

In the last few decades, fugitive and former slave activists have received more historical attention as the subject of biographies.⁴¹ In general, such works provide insight into the tensions which existed between fugitives' roles as abolitionist speakers and race leaders and the crisis of identity that must have been provoked by the expectation that they conform to and perform white abolitionists' disempowering notions of race. As studies of individual life stories, however, they often lack a deep textual analysis of the rhetorical strategies which fugitive activists used to deliver more empowering messages to audiences despite such confining expectations. Some of the most evocative treatments of fugitive slaves' activism have come from the field of literary studies rather than history. Beginning with studies of slave narratives, literary scholarship turned to examining different

objectification of the enslaved. This scholarly gaze, the vast condescension bestowed on the very real history of black suffering under the political economy of a harsh slave regimen, leads people astray. It is based on a whitewashed understanding of abolition that reads out the black presence in it completely. Its roots lie in slaveholders' defensive response to abolitionist criticism, and it fundamentally misreads abolitionist agitation, the attempt to evoke radical empathy from an audience whose very comforts were dependent on the exploitation of those deemed inferior and expendable." I agree with her assessment of what abolitionist agitation sought to achieve and of the significance of the "black presence" in constructing those representations, but the presence of African American actors does not change the character of what white abolitionists produced or make their rhetoric interchangeable. The issue is not black and white – not all white representations were of a single character, nor were all representations constructed by African Americans. However, it is worthwhile to consider some of the patterns and distinctive messages that emerged when fugitive slave activists acted as public representatives of the slave. Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 3-4.

⁴¹ See Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers*; Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall*; Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond: The Library of Virginia, 2003); Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1830-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

strategies of self-representation and the social critique employed therein.⁴² The antebellum slave narratives are a rich source, capable of revealing the patterns and innovations of abolitionist rhetoric, different representations of slavery, and the tension implicit in using an individual story to illuminate the wrongs done to a whole race. However, in their exclusive focus on published narratives, these studies fail to acknowledge the full range of fugitives' activism on the antislavery stage or the larger social and historical context in which they operated. By combining the historian's attention to context with a close "textual" analysis of the diverse acts performed on the antislavery stage, this study corrects some of the deficiencies of existing historical and literary scholarship.

The Players

Throughout this chapter, I refer to fugitive slave activists who did their work on "the antislavery stage." It is probably fair to say that there were actually multiple antislavery "stages" – different kinds of platforms, venues, and modes of

⁴² See, for example, William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000); Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); DoVeanna S. Fulton, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001); Gregory P. Lampe, *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice 1818-1845* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University, 1998); Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Carla L. Peterson, "Doers of the Word"; John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner, eds., *The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory* ([Macomb, Ill.: Western Illinois University, 1982); Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope"; Francis Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives*, 2nd edition (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1979); and Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

performance wherein black and white abolitionists engaged different audiences with antislavery content. However, all of those different venues fall under my basic conceptualization of the antislavery stage, writ large – that is, all those spaces in which abolitionists performed “public acts” – visual, spoken, and textual acts received by an audience – that contributed to perceptions of slavery and the enslaved. Such public acts included but were not limited to public appearances (sometimes on *literal* stages), speeches, spoken and written narratives of slavery, letters to the editor, songs, and re-enactments of escape. For escaped slaves who became “Professional Fugitives,” even the choices made in private life could be part of their performance on the antislavery stage, with the public at large ready to interpret each act’s meaning for the race as a whole.⁴³ When I refer to “the antislavery stage” in this study, I am focusing, in particular, on the public stage on which fugitive slave activists constructed and performed their own representations of slavery, race, and identity.

While only a minority of slaves who successfully escaped the South became public figures in the abolition movement, many more took this path than can be adequately treated in a single chapter.⁴⁴ This study focuses on the work and

⁴³ Quote from Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement.” My conception of “public acts” is partially indebted to Carla L. Peterson’s treatment of spoken and physical performance as alternative texts in *“Doers of the Word”*. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between performance and audience in the construction of race, see Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1-20.

⁴⁴ It is important to acknowledge that taking on a public role and publicizing one’s fugitive status was a decided risk for escaped slaves, who were already in danger of being pursued by slave catchers and their former owners. Most fugitives wanted to reach free territory and blend into the community without drawing notice, rather than make their identities known. Estimates suggest that as many as 1,000-5,000 slaves escaped to freedom every year between 1830 and 1860. Many received help from the black community, slave and free, in the South and in the North. The Vigilance Committees led by free blacks in the North provided critical assistance to fugitives and much of that work was, by necessity, carried out in secrecy. It was dangerous for abolitionists to even keep records of those

experiences of Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Craft, Henry “Box” Brown, and Harriet Jacobs. All well-known players on the antislavery stage in their time, these activists offer insight into some of the different tactics which fugitives used to engage the public on the antislavery question. They also reveal, through their individual experiences on the antislavery stage, something of what it meant to be “representatives of their brethren in bonds.”⁴⁵

Frederick Douglass, born a slave in Maryland in 1818, escaped to New York in 1838.⁴⁶ Unlike the other fugitives examined here, Douglass began his career as a public speaker in the black community, where he acted as a lay minister and spoke at black abolitionist meetings on subjects such as anti-colonization.⁴⁷ In 1841, he attended more general antislavery meetings, where he came to the attention of white abolitionists and eventually revealed his own history as a slave. At the urging of William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator* and founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), and John C. Collins, general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (MASS), Douglass became a professional lecturer on the antislavery lecture circuit later that year, eventually touring throughout the North and in Britain.⁴⁸ In 1845, he published a narrative of his life

they had helped. Nonetheless, Underground Railroad agents did record information about some of the fugitives they assisted. Although individual fugitives were rarely identified by name, activists did publish accounts of some of the dramatic escapes and rescues they were part of. These fugitives did not personally perform on the antislavery stage, but their stories nonetheless played an important role in drawing attention to the fugitive slave issue and the antislavery cause. See Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 4, 7-10, 18, 58-60, 76, 83-84.

⁴⁵ *Liberator*, April 2, 1852.

⁴⁶ William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 3, 68-73.

⁴⁷ Lampe, *Frederick Douglass*, 38-39, 45-46; *Liberator*, March 29, 1839; *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years, 1817-1849*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 25-26.

⁴⁸ *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 25-27, 45.

as a slave.⁴⁹ Douglass contributed to the abolition movement as a public speaker, writer, and editor in the black press. He was a powerful force in the abolition movement throughout his career and continued to be a race leader until his death in 1895. This chapter concentrates on the early years of Douglass's activism (1841-1848), when his emerging public persona was mostly closely tied to his identity as a fugitive slave.⁵⁰

William and Ellen Craft lived as husband and wife in slavery in Macon, Georgia. Ellen was born in 1826 and William likely in the same year.⁵¹ In 1848, they escaped from slavery through a daring ruse in which light-skinned Ellen cross-dressed as a young white male invalid and William acted the part of her slave. They traveled to safety in Philadelphia by public transit and were then assisted by members of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and the local Underground Railroad. Word traveled fast in abolitionist circles about their escape and, in 1849, they were invited to accompany William Wells Brown, another fugitive slave and an accomplished orator, on an antislavery lecture tour. Their story was reprinted in many newspapers and they were soon introduced to audiences in a number of

⁴⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), in *Autobiographies* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

⁵⁰ Douglass began publication of the *North Star*, a black antislavery newspaper, in December 1847. In the years that followed, he continued to speak before white and mixed audiences about abolition, race, and prejudice, but as an editor, writer, and speaker, he also began to address black audiences more frequently on issues of race, prejudice, political action, and self-improvement. I would argue that the beginning of Douglass's editorial career marks a fundamental shift in his activism and relationship to the white-dominated antislavery movement.

⁵¹ Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers*, 88; Interview of William and Ellen Craft from Chamber's *Edinburgh Journal*, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 268. Blackett does not give a birth date for William, but the interview reprinted in *Slave Testimony* indicates that they were both the same age at the time.

antislavery venues.⁵² They settled briefly in Boston, but fled to Britain after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850.⁵³ In Britain, William and Ellen again joined W. W. Brown on lecture tours and became active in abolitionist circles. They wrote and published a slave narrative in 1860. After the Civil War, they returned to the U.S. and assisted freedpeople in the South by establishing a cooperative farm and school in southern Georgia.⁵⁴ They contributed to the abolition movement as public speakers and writers.

Henry “Box” Brown was born a slave in Virginia around 1815. In 1848, his wife and children were taken from him and sold to slave traders heading for the Deep South. Devastated by the loss, Brown decided to try for his freedom several months later in 1849.⁵⁵ Working with J.C.A. Smith, a free black with whom he sang in a Richmond church choir, Brown arranged to have himself put in a box and “conveyed as dry goods” to the free state of Pennsylvania, by train.⁵⁶ The box was addressed to James Miller McKim, a Philadelphia abolitionist who opened the parcel on March 24, 1849 and was relieved to find Brown still alive after his confinement.⁵⁷ As was usual with such dramatic escapes, word quickly spread of Brown’s feat; he was introduced to several leading abolitionists and within a few months he was a regular presence on the antislavery stage.⁵⁸ Although Brown was illiterate, he

⁵² Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers*, 89-90.

⁵³ William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Miami: Mnemosyne Pub., 1969), 87-92 [hereafter *Running*]; Document 31: William Wells Brown to Frederick Douglass, December 20, 1850, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 241-242.

⁵⁴ Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers*, 128-129.

⁵⁵ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 51-56 [hereafter *Narrative* (1851)].

⁵⁶ Brown, *Narrative* (1851), 54-55; quote from 58.

⁵⁷ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 29-35.

⁵⁸ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 37-39; *Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

published a slave narrative in 1849 with the assistance of white abolitionist Charles Stearns. A revised narrative was published in 1851 and, although still produced with the assistance of an amanuensis and editor, Brown's own voice comes through more directly by providing insight into his inner struggle as a husband and father with no legal means to protect his family.⁵⁹ By the summer of 1850, Brown was touring with his own panorama, *Mirror of Slavery*, a series of paintings which depicted different aspects of the slave trade and slavery.⁶⁰ In addition to accompanying his panorama with narration and songs, Brown incorporated the box in which he escaped into his presentations in dramatic re-enactments of his confinement and release.⁶¹ In 1850, he traveled to Britain with his panorama and toured for many years, initially in partnership with the man who helped him hatch his plan for escape, J.C.A. Smith.⁶²

Unlike the other four fugitives examined in this chapter, Harriet Jacobs never worked as an antislavery lecturer. Born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813, Jacobs was confronted with the unwanted sexual interest of her master at an early

⁵⁹ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 129-132. For the text of the first edition, see Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. Boston: Brown and Stearns (1849), Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [hereafter Documenting the American South], 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html>.

⁶⁰ *Liberator*, May 10, 1850.

⁶¹ *Liberator*, July 11, 1851; Illustration, Advertisement from *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 November 1850 and Illustration, Advertisement from *Leeds Mercury*, 17 May 1851, reproduced in Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 117, 127.

⁶² Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 115-116, 158-159.

age.⁶³ In her teens, she sought out a relationship with a white man to discourage her master's continued harassment and in the hopes that the connection would offer some protection to her and any future children. It was a bargain she entered knowingly and with great feelings of guilt and trepidation.⁶⁴ In 1835, after having two children with her lover and continuing to suffer the wrath of her master, she ran away and spent the next several years in hiding in her grandmother's home. She finally fled to the North in 1842.⁶⁵ Although she came in contact with abolitionist circles immediately and was encouraged to tell the story of her confinement and escape, Jacobs resisted a public role. Upon hearing of Jacobs' extramarital affair and illegitimate children, one of the first abolitionists she came in contact with in Philadelphia urged her not to be so open regarding that aspect of her life with others, as it might give some "people a pretext for treating [her] with contempt."⁶⁶ Later, Jacobs would write that she shied away from becoming a spokesperson for the antislavery cause because she felt she could not tell the whole truth of her experience in slavery without being judged for the path she had chosen out of necessity.⁶⁷ Many years later, at the urging of a close abolitionist friend in whom she had confided, Jacobs did tell her story in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1860. During the Civil War, Jacobs went to Washington D.C. to aid the contrabands and reported on their progress and condition to the

⁶³ Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 3; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Edited by L. M. Child, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27 [hereafter *Incidents*].

⁶⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54-56.

⁶⁵ Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 44-48, 63-65.

⁶⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 160.

⁶⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 160-161; Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 66-67, 70, 78.

antislavery press and other interested parties in the North.⁶⁸ Her contribution to the antislavery movement primarily consisted of the public role she assumed as a writer who spoke on behalf of the slave in letters to the editor, newspaper articles, and her own narrative.

These five fugitives became a part of abolition's public propaganda campaign at different times, in different ways. Each of them published slave narratives that influenced public opinion in the U.S. and abroad and made their stories of slavery and escape available to a much wider audience. They spoke at antislavery meetings, created visual representations of slavery to educate the public, and engaged in public debate regarding slavery and race. A critical examination of their narratives, public debate and activism, and personal interaction with the sometimes limiting expectations of white abolitionists reveals that fugitive slave activists made sophisticated contributions to the antislavery movement by constructing and communicating their own ideas about slavery, race, and gender.

"Bleeding Victims" and "Benevolent Objects": White Abolitionist Images of Slaves

Inspired by free blacks' opposition to gradual emancipation schemes that would forcibly deport blacks from the U.S. and colonize them in Africa, William Lloyd Garrison launched a critical attack on the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1832. In the wake of his exposition, some white antislavery sympathizers began

⁶⁸ Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 158-168.

to question the racism and moral compromise inherent in the ACS's solution for the nation's race problem.⁶⁹ A radical minority of immediate abolitionists, so-named for their insistence on the swift, uncompensated, and unconditional emancipation of all U.S. slaves, began to call not only for immediate abolition but also for the incorporation of blacks into free society. It was this group of activists, working with local and national antislavery organizations, who first brought the antislavery message to northern whites on a large scale.

Abolitionists faced the difficult task of convincing an alternately hostile and indifferent populace that slavery was a sinful and brutal institution for which the North shared responsibility and that emancipated blacks could be made into productive members of free society. According to literary scholar John Sekora, "Wendell Phillips had said that the unconcern and insensibility of white northerners should never be underestimated."⁷⁰ As with many propaganda campaigns, abolitionists' success hinged on appealing to the widest possible audience with a message that was simple, direct, and emotional. As whites constructed an image of slavery to present to the public, they focused on its worst – and most dramatic – aspects and consequences. In the process, the symbolic figure of the slave often emerged as a degraded, brutish, and violated victim.

White abolitionists effectively created a disempowering image of enslaved men and women by emphasizing their helplessness and degradation and the threats posed to their masculinity and femininity. Garrison described southern slaves as

⁶⁹ Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 134-143.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope," 502.

“wretched, degraded beings, ... pining in hopeless bondage.”⁷¹ This image of a “pining” slave was particularly effective because it gave the rhetorical slave the appearance of beseeching help directly from the audience. If slaves were victims, then white audiences were their potential saviors. Garrison’s turn of phrase articulated one of the messages behind the well-known antislavery image of the kneeling slave – half-naked, hands bound and reaching upward, asking an invisible but surely benevolent onlooker, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”⁷² Showing slaves in helpless, dependent positions not only appealed to whites who were moved to engage in disinterested benevolence, but may also have made the slave – and the free black he or she would become – seem less threatening in an era that witnessed the violence of Nat Turner’s rebellion. The kneeling figure did not declare “I am a Man!” as black activists would in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s; he awkwardly inquired whether he was something less. In his study of abolitionist imagery, historian Philip Lapansky argues that even when white abolitionists depicted scenes of emancipation, they continued to imagine freed blacks in servile postures that hinted at their passive, dependent relationship with whites.⁷³ Abolition seemed less revolutionary when one imagined the master-slave relationship organically replaced by that of benevolent patron and grateful subject.

⁷¹ William Lloyd Garrison, “An Address to the American Colonization Society (1829),” in *Against Slavery: an Abolitionist Reader*, ed. Mason Lowance (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 96.

⁷² Philip Lapansky, “Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 203-206.

⁷³ Lapansky, “Graphic Discord,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 211-214. Art historian Kirk Savage has found a similar pattern of depicting freedpeople in subservient postures in Civil War monuments and memorials, with similar implications. See Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

White abolitionist rhetoric was thick with the language of degradation, brutalization, and dehumanization. Wendell Phillips referred to southern slaves as “imbruted souls, ... darkened and degraded millions – sunk below the level of intellectual life.”⁷⁴ When abolitionists communicated their “indignation at the system which would dehumanize such men and women, and sink them to the condition of goods and chattels,” they came dangerously close to accepting that slavery not only *treated* slaves as, but had indeed *made* them, somehow less than human.⁷⁵ Lydia Maria Child expressed surprise when a “colored woman” took offense after she “compared the happiness of slaves to that of well fed pigs.”⁷⁶ Apparently Child did not recognize that her analogy, and not the effects of slavery alone, effectively reduced the men and women held in bondage to beasts driven entirely by physical wants. Abolitionists needed to communicate the fact that slavery was oppressive, but by painting it as utterly so, they risked making the slave seem entirely degraded by it. This view ignored the fact that individuals living under slavery had human feelings, affections, and hopes that, though threatened, were never entirely obliterated by the brutality of the institution. Certainly, it complicated the message to say that those who were brutalized were not brutes and that those who were oppressed were not powerless to forge bonds and identities based on something other than that oppression. But as will be shown, this was a

⁷⁴ *Liberator*, April 23, 1852.

⁷⁵ *Liberator*, February 28, 1851.

⁷⁶ Lydia Maria Child to Caroline Weston, Northampton, 27 July 1838, in *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880*, ed. Milton Meltzer, et al (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 81 [hereafter *LMC Letters*].

distinction that fugitive slave activists were very careful to make in their own antislavery addresses.

When white abolitionists did discuss slaves' attempts to make lives for themselves within slavery, it was usually to emphasize the many obstacles against them. A frequent theme of abolitionist discourse was the vulnerability of the slave family. Proper gender roles and relations, as defined by middle- to upper-class whites, could not be maintained in a slave population, which was "subject to the selfish interests or more selfish lust of [a] master."⁷⁷ How could a male slave fulfill the roles of provider and protector when "He lives not for his family, but for a stranger?"⁷⁸ White abolitionists spoke of male slaves unmanned by their powerlessness to protect wives and children, who might at any moment be "exposed to every species of insult and indignity" and "violated before [their] eyes."⁷⁹ Garrison imagined himself, a free white man, in the slave's place and spoke in horror of the idea "that [his] wife [could] be sold from [him] for the vilest purposes" and his "children ... torn from [his] arms, and disposed of ... like sheep to market."⁸⁰ Whites' rhetoric often focused on how enslaved women's roles as mothers were similarly jeopardized by the knowledge that they had no power to protect their children who were "doomed for their mother's skin to Slavery."⁸¹ Although married white women

⁷⁷ Charles Sumner, "The Barbarism of Slavery (1860)," in *Against Slavery*, 317. On middle-class gender norms of the nineteenth century, see Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*.

⁷⁸ William Ellery Channing, "Slavery (1835)," in *Against Slavery*, 184.

⁷⁹ Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen & Ticknor, 1833), 200; Horace Mann, "Speech on the Institution of Slavery (1852)," in *Against Slavery*, 271.

⁸⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, "No Compromise with Slavery (1854)," in *Against Slavery*, 128.

⁸¹ Charles Sumner, "The Barbarism of Slavery (1860)," in *Against Slavery*, 317.

also lacked legal control over their offspring, slave mothers were made doubly vulnerable by their subjection to a male patriarch who lacked a father's interest in protecting his children, effectively leaving "children in an unprotected state, worse than orphanage."⁸²

Even more common than allusions to the disrupted slave family were images of "females without any protection save their own feeble strength" against the licentiousness and depravity of white males. Mulatto children were cited as evidence of what it meant for men to have unlimited power over women in an institution that "recognize[d] no social obligations, no natural relations" between a white father and his slave child.⁸³ Abolitionists spoke of women "stripped by their degraded condition of woman's self-respect" and "allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame."⁸⁴ Such rhetoric raised questions about whether female slaves possessed a morality that was distinct from the acts forced upon them. In some cases, white abolitionists assumed that the sexual exploitation which enslaved women experienced actually reflected on their own morality, making them deserving of the label of promiscuous Jezebels.⁸⁵ The image of the female slave emerged as a woman entirely defined by her victimization.

⁸² Daniel Foster, "Address on Slavery: Delivered in Danvers, Mass.," (Boston: Published by Bela Marsh, 1849), 21.

⁸³ John Greenleaf Whittier, "Justice and Expediency: Or Slavery Considered with a View to its Rightful and Effectual Remedy, Abolition (1833)," in *Against Slavery*, 149.

⁸⁴ William Ellery Channing, "Slavery (1835)," in *Against Slavery*, 185; Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, 19.

⁸⁵ Deborah Gray White's study of female slaves analyzes the image of the slave woman as Jezebel in more depth. See White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 27-61.

Speaking of these “delicate subjects” was a way for abolitionists to court the sympathy of white women in particular, who were often called on to be active in the movement for the sake of their suffering “sisters.”⁸⁶ The appeal to white women was made explicit in 1830 when the female version of the kneeling slave image first appeared in the United States. Like her male counterpart, the woman in this icon knelt, half-clothed and bare-breasted, manacled hands reaching upward, and asked, “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?”⁸⁷ The slave figure’s bare breasts emphasized her perpetual sexual vulnerability and her powerlessness to shield herself so long as her wrists remained shackled. In alternate versions of this image, the kneeling female slave was depicted at the feet of a white female liberator who stood upright and fully clothed.⁸⁸ Scholar Karen Sanchez-Eppler suggests that this double image achieved the desired effect not by depicting a shared womanhood but by emphasizing the difference between enslaved black women and free white women. Confronted with their relative privilege, white women may have felt more sympathy for female slaves, but they continued to see them as “benevolent objects” rather than “sisters.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Lydia Maria Child, “Introduction” to Jacobs, *Incidents*, 3; Angelina Grimke, *An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States. Issued by an Antislavery Convention of American Women, 1837* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 21.

⁸⁷ Lapansky, “Graphic Discord,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 205-206.

⁸⁸ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists and American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 17-19.

⁸⁹ Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 21. Quote from *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison to the *Liberator*, Worcester, 7 September 1832, in *I Will Be Heard!, 1822-1835*, ed. Walter M. Merrill, vol. 1 of *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971-1981), 162 [hereafter *Letters of WLG*, vol. 1].

The literal images of slaves which white abolitionists fashioned and disseminated reveal much about the disempowering implications of their messages. Slaves were shown as fettered and helpless, supplicant and pleading. Their degradation was emphasized in their minimal and torn clothing, their likeness to brutes in the sheer physicality which their hunched and poorly adorned forms communicated to viewers. Slave men on their knees, dependent and beseeching help from above, did not create an image of strong black masculinity, nor did the exposed female form contribute to a respectful view of black womanhood. The potential impact of these images cannot be underestimated, for they were dispersed far and wide not only in newspapers, pamphlets, and antislavery readers, but on tokens, keepsake boxes, handkerchiefs, and pincushions.⁹⁰ Sarah Grimke hoped that the “speechless agony of the fettered slave” depicted in such productions would “appeal to the heart” of many, but it is worth noting that these images contributed to a literal and figurative stereotype of slaves who could no more speak for themselves than free themselves.⁹¹ In print and material culture, white abolitionists helped to naturalize images of slaves (and African Americans) in a perpetually dependent posture.

In order to understand the context in which fugitive activists gained access to the antislavery stage, one must examine how white abolitionists understood

⁹⁰ Yellin, *Women and Sisters*, 22-23; Elizabeth B. Clark, “‘The Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (Sept. 1995), 481; Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 23-24.

⁹¹ Minutes for Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women: 1837: New York, NY, in *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th, 1837* (William S. Dorr, New York, NY, 1837).

fugitives' place in the movement. Sweeping statements about the condition of "the millions who are still groaning in bondage" confronted the realities of individual lives when white abolitionists incorporated fugitive slaves into their rhetoric and presentations. Fugitives could give much-needed detail, immediacy, and humanity to abolitionist diatribes against chattel slavery and were symbolically important for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they gave a face, a name, and a personal history to the otherwise undifferentiated "millions."⁹² A living and breathing person, lately enslaved and still living in fear of recapture, made the abstract issue of slavery come alive for audiences in a way that no mere rhetoric could. As one observer remarked, "all the theoretical arguments for or against slavery are feeble, compared with these accounts of living men of what they personally endured under its dominion."⁹³ As hunted men and women, fugitive slaves may also have inspired empathy in audiences by dramatizing the arbitrariness of the line between slave and free. This was part of the reason that the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 provoked such widespread protest in the North and why abolitionists seized on that issue to create sympathy for the antislavery cause.⁹⁴

Fugitive slaves were also important because of the testimony they could provide about the actual condition and treatment of southern slaves. White abolitionists spoke of them as "living epistles from the South," messengers who bore direct witness to the horrors of slavery and its effect upon individuals and

⁹² *Liberator*, February 1, 1850.

⁹³ Gara, "The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement," 198.

⁹⁴ See Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 24-27, 63-64; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 381, 388, 407, 500, 514-550.

families.⁹⁵ Fugitives spoke with the authenticity of experience and could refute pro-slavery constructions of a benign bondage with what they had seen and lived through personally. Their dramatic and dangerous flights to the North were concrete testimony against the “*contentment* of the slave in his bondage,” an argument frequently advanced by slaveowners who claimed that northerners simply didn’t understand black and white relations below the Mason-Dixon line.⁹⁶ Northern public opinion on slavery was largely shaped by the competing propaganda of pro- and anti-slavery adherents, so the testimony of fugitive slaves was a distinct advantage for abolitionists who were frequently accused of hyperbole by their critics.⁹⁷

White abolitionists acknowledged that fugitives possessed the authority of personal experience and that they had an incalculably powerful effect on audiences. As individuals who had survived the institution, they could communicate something about slavery that no free white man or woman could. Samuel J. May admonished audiences to take action, reminding them that they had “seen men and women, children of God, presenting every appearance of humanity,” who “must have spoken

⁹⁵ *Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

⁹⁶ *Liberator*, June 1, 1849.

⁹⁷ An incident that occurred in Boston during an attempt to recapture William and Ellen Craft offers an amusing indication of northern whites’ dependence on propaganda for their knowledge of slavery. John Knight, who was dispatched to Boston to retrieve the Crafts, wrote a letter to the *Liberator* after his failed attempt in order to correct certain “contradictory reports” about the events as they unfolded. He expressed amusement at the groups of whites who approached him in public while he was in Boston to inquire about the condition of southern slaves. Many, he said, “actually seemed to think that our negroes were chained every night after they finished work” Apparently, some northern whites took abolitionists literally when they made frequent references to slaves suffering in chains. See *Liberator*, December 6, 1850.

to [their] hearts as no written words could have done.”⁹⁸ Audiences were repeatedly moved by how “heart-stirring” they found the “simple, artless narratives” of fugitives and valued the opportunity to hear the “*victim’s account of the workings of this great institution.*”⁹⁹ As one witness wrote to the *Liberator*, “It seems to us, that we of the North do not fully appreciate our position in this matter. We frankly confess that we never before felt it in its full force, until the other evening, when we listened to the narrative of William Crafts.”¹⁰⁰

Undoubtedly there was also a certain degree of the spectacle surrounding fugitives, as “specimens of the peculiar property of the South,” and abolitionists were not reluctant to take advantage of it.¹⁰¹ As historian Larry Gara reminds us, even those who were attracted to an abolition meeting out of some combination of curiosity and voyeurism might have been susceptible to the antislavery message that underlay fugitives’ appearances. White abolitionist Levi Coffin recorded instances of non-abolitionists who “were powerfully moved by the sight of a fellow human fleeing from slavery” and even one “pro-slavery merchant” who donated money to help a fugitive.¹⁰² The *Liberator* frequently carried reports on the unusually large number of attendants at antislavery meetings when the presence of fugitive slaves was advertised.¹⁰³ For those who hadn’t already heard the salacious stories of fugitives’ escapes, meeting announcements offered tantalizing details to

⁹⁸ *Liberator*, June 8, 1849; “Narratives of Fugitive Slaves” by Ephraim Peabody, *Christian Examiner*, Vol. XLVII, No. 1 (July-September, 1849) in Davis, *The Slave’s Narrative*, 20.

⁹⁹ *Liberator*, February 9 and June 22, 1849.

¹⁰⁰ *Liberator*, April 6, 1849.

¹⁰¹ *Liberator*, February 9, 1849.

¹⁰² Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement,” 198, 202.

¹⁰³ *Liberator*, February 16, March 2, and April 6, 1849.

spark interest. For those who had heard the stories secondhand, they heralded the opportunity to see the subject in the flesh.¹⁰⁴

Not all whose stories became known in abolitionist circles necessarily became fixtures on the antislavery stage. Indeed, John Sekora argues that white abolitionists used exacting criteria to determine whether they had found a “usable black story” that could stand up to public scrutiny and communicate the desired message to whites.¹⁰⁵ In some cases, a fugitive slave might only see the stage once, as abolitionists seized on the drama of a recent escape.¹⁰⁶ In other cases, initial interest could lead to a lasting career. Regardless, it was often immediately after an escape that fugitives came to the attention of abolitionists and had their first experiences in the limelight. While those fugitives who went on to have careers as activists began to exercise more autonomy within several months’ time, their early forays on stage tended to be more limited and under the direction of whites, a somewhat natural development given their fresh escape from slavery, lack of acculturation into free Northern society, and the shock of a newly public role.

During this early period, white abolitionists were more likely to tell a fugitive’s story for him or her. In some cases, fugitives were used rather like exhibits – the climax to abolitionists’ stories of degradation and suffering, or silent backdrops whose names became refrains in speeches. In 1855, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* reported on an Ohio clergyman who drew back a curtain at the end

¹⁰⁴ *Liberator*, February 2, February 9, and April 20, 1849; July 11, 1851.

¹⁰⁵ Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 497.

¹⁰⁶ This seems to have been the case, for example, with Betsy Blakely, who was introduced at an antislavery meeting immediately after her escape. See *Liberator*, February 1, 1850.

of his antislavery speech to reveal a family of fugitives posed like figures in a *tableaux vivant*. ““There is a specimen of the fruits of the infernal system of slavery,’ he cried. The audience, said a local reporter, was ‘surprised and horror-stricken. Many eyes were filled with tears.’”¹⁰⁷ More often, fugitives simply stood or sat in the background on stage as whites gave speeches, introduced the fugitive(s), and told their stories for them; sometimes they were called to step forward so that the audience could get a better look at them. When Henry “Box” Brown and William and Ellen Craft first appeared before antislavery audiences, they were sometimes presented in this way.¹⁰⁸

Once the public knew a fugitive’s story, white abolitionists could make reference to them in their speeches in order to call up associations with the suffering and hunted slave. No sooner had Frederick Douglass delivered his first speech in front of a white audience than Garrison rose and seized on him as a rhetorical device, demanding of the crowd, ““Have we been listening to a thing, a piece of property, or to a man?’ ‘A man! A man!’” they shouted back.¹⁰⁹ Long after William and Ellen Craft and Henry “Box” Brown had disappeared from the antislavery stage in the U.S. and were working in Britain, American abolitionists were still using their names and stories to recall the vulnerability, humanity, and

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Gara, “The Professional Fugitive in the Abolition Movement,” 198. *Tableaux vivants*, or “living pictures,” were a theatrical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in which subjects posed on stage in virtual still-lives, sometimes recreating the image of famous works of art, sometimes representing scenes in a story. The theatrical use of fugitive slaves as backdrops to antislavery speeches and presentations may be connected to this contemporary tradition. For more on tableaux, see Jack W. McCullough, *Living Pictures on the New York Stage* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁸ *Liberator*, February 9, February 16, and June 8, 1849; February 1, 1850.

¹⁰⁹ *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 26-27.

drama of the hunted fugitive. Ellen appears alone in these references more frequently than with her husband, perhaps due to the special vulnerability she represented as both a woman and a “white slave.”¹¹⁰

White abolitionists may have had their own ideas about the role that fugitive slaves could play in the movement, but fugitive activists did not always allow themselves to be confined by those expectations. John Sekora has done important work identifying the ways in which white abolitionists attempted to control the terms of fugitives’ performances, but he ultimately argues that that these efforts were so pervasive as to negate the possibility of black activists’ autonomy or individuality within the movement. For Sekora, the “black message” was entirely sublimated by the “white envelope.”¹¹¹ A close reading of fugitive activists’ public acts renders a different picture. Fugitives disentangled themselves from the disempowering rhetoric of whites by using their own experiences in slavery to construct a positive image of black identity. The next section examines how fugitives used the antislavery stage in order to deliver their own messages to the public based on the authority of experience and witness.

¹¹⁰ Quote from *Liberator*, February 16, 1849. For references to Ellen see *Liberator*, May 18, June 1, and June 8, 1849; February 1, 1850; January 17, February 5, and August 1, 1851; July 24 and July 27, 1857; August 19, 1859; June 29, 1860; January 29 and February 8, 1861; April 8, 1864.

¹¹¹ Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope.”

Neither Powerful nor Powerless: Fugitive Activists Construct an Image of the Slave

Each of the fugitives examined here claimed an authority to play a more active and independent role in the abolition movement than their early forays onto the antislavery stage allowed. White activists recognized a limited authority in fugitive slaves based on their ability to relate their personal experiences in bondage, but fugitives also claimed this authority for themselves. This is evidenced by the ways in which they pointedly differentiated their intimate knowledge of slavery from the secondhand and often abstract knowledge possessed by white abolitionists, thereby claiming a unique ability to critique the institution. Fugitives used their personal experience to draw larger conclusions about the institution of slavery as a whole and to bear witness to its impact on the lives of other slaves who could not, at the moment, speak for themselves.

Fugitive activists became slaves' representatives in a dual sense. On the one hand, they represented the interests of the enslaved men and women still lingering in bondage. On the other hand, they themselves came to be understood by whites as representations of the slave, of slavery, and of blacks on the cusp of freedom. As blacks who assumed a public role, the fugitive slave activists discussed here communicated particular constructions of race and gender when they addressed white audiences on stage and in print. Their own stories, observations, and arguments communicated something to audiences not just about the institution of slavery, but also about the race that was held within it. Garrison articulated this association directly when he told audiences "that Douglass was 'not a picked man ...

but a specimen of what thousands, now bound down by the yoke of oppression, might be ...”¹¹² A close analysis of fugitives’ public acts reveals that they engaged with many of the themes used by white abolitionists as they developed their own narratives regarding race and slavery. In the process, however, they constructed a vision of enslaved men and women which was more complex than that promulgated by many sympathetic whites.

Fugitive activists questioned the idea of the slave as utterly helpless and degraded. Their own successful escapes demonstrated that not all slaves were “pining in hopeless bondage,” waiting to be rescued by benevolent whites.¹¹³ When “Box” Brown incorporated a re-enactment of his confinement and release from the box which carried him to freedom into his performances, he claimed ownership of his own successful flight.¹¹⁴ Douglass spoke to this issue more directly when he told audiences that, far from existing in an unconscious state, “A large portion of the slaves *know* that they have a right to their liberty.”¹¹⁵ He called the ignorance and childishness which masters (and other whites) associated with slaves a farce meant to conceal slaves’ knowledge of cracks in the system and the antislavery unrest brewing in the North. While slaves put their hopes in the idea that the abolitionist

¹¹² Editor’s introduction to the text, “American Prejudice and Southern Religion: An Address Delivered in Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841,” in Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 1, 1841-1846, ed. John W. Blasingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 9 [hereafter *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1].

¹¹³ William Lloyd Garrison, “An Address to the American Colonization Society (1829),” in *Against Slavery*, 96.

¹¹⁴ *Liberator*, July 11, 1851; Illustration, Advertisement from *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 November 1850 and Illustration, Advertisement from *Leeds Mercury*, 17 May 1851, reproduced in Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 117, 127.

¹¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, “I Have Come to Tell You Something About Slavery: An Address Delivered in Lynn, Massachusetts in October, 1841” in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 4.

campaign would bring a legal end to slavery, Douglass also warned that they would not wait forever. “[T]he time is fast coming,” he said, “when they will act in concert, and effect their own emancipation, if justice is not done by some other extraneous agency.”¹¹⁶ Douglass presented an image of slaves that showed men and women who knew they had a right to rule over themselves – and were ready to do so.

Henry “Box” Brown constructed his own image of slavery when he commissioned the making of his moving panorama, *Mirror of Slavery*, in 1849. Panoramas were a popular form of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century. What might be described as a precursor to the “moving picture,” moving panoramas were a series of large paintings rendered in vertical succession on an extremely long canvas. The canvas was placed in a frame with rollers at the top and bottom so that it could be rotated to reveal each subsequent scene.¹¹⁷ Advertisements for Brown’s panorama reveal that it was composed of over 40 scenes depicting different aspects of slavery, including the slave trade, slave labor, violence, and slaves’ attempts to escape.¹¹⁸ While he continued to relate the story of his own escape from slavery, Brown also sang songs composed around different scenes and provided narration

¹¹⁶ Frederick Douglass, “The Union, Slavery, and Abolitionist Petitions: Addresses Delivered in Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841,” in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 8. In 1862, William Craft expressed a similar conviction, saying “that if the government of the United States had not taken up the question of emancipation he believed the slaves themselves would.” See Leeds Young Men’s Anti-Slavery Demonstration, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 26, 1862, Reel 14, fr. 265, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, Microfilm, 17 reels (New York: Microfilming Corporation of America; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1981-1983) [hereafter *BAP* microfilm].

¹¹⁷ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 71.

¹¹⁸ *Liberator*, May 10, 1850.

for the panorama, thereby interpreting the visual representations of slavery for his audience.¹¹⁹

Brown responded to the idea of slaves' degradation by constructing images that emphasized blacks' humanity and capability. Among the scenes in his panorama was one which depicted "The Nubian Family in Freedom," prior to their capture by slave traders. Brown's imagery contradicted the pro-slavery argument that servitude was the natural condition of blacks by showing Africans living productive, happy lives in their native land. Paired with scenes depicting the exploitation and abuse of slaves, Brown showed individuals making their escape. In addition to a picture of the "Nubians, escaping by Night," the panorama contained scenes of the escapes of "Box" Brown, "Ellen Crafts," and another fugitive slave activist, Henry Bibb. The final image sought not to impress audiences with slaves' suffering, but with the triumph that would be theirs upon "UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION."¹²⁰ Through the medium of his moving panorama and accompanying narration, Brown presented audiences with an image of slavery that emphasized slaves' humanity, consciousness, and agency.

Fugitive activists rebutted the idea of blacks' natural inferiority by taking up the nature vs. nurture argument and insisting that it was slaves' condition, and not their capacity, which stunted them. As Douglass put it, "You degrade us, and then ask us why we are degraded – you shut our mouths, and then ask why we don't

¹¹⁹ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 105-109; Illustration, advertisement from *Leeds Mercury*, 17 May 1851, reproduced in Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 127; *Liberator*, May 10 and May 31, 1850.

¹²⁰ All quotes in this paragraph are from *Liberator*, May 10, 1850.

speak”¹²¹ When Harriet Jacobs reported on the condition of contrabands during the war, she urged readers not to judge those “degraded by slavery” too quickly, for “You have helped to make them what they are.”¹²² In a letter to the editor, William Craft asked readers whether they thought “the American slave-holders deserve[d] any credit” for the slave’s “depressed” condition.¹²³ This argument was furthered by insisting on the shared humanity – and, therefore, capability – of blacks and whites. Douglass asserted that if “the black man was inferior – [it was] because he was ground down and oppressed, and the means of improvement taken from him.” “[A]ny other nation, placed in the same circumstances, would shew the same” results.¹²⁴ Fugitive activists drew attention to whites’ complicity in the current condition of the black race and asked them to reserve judgment of those whom they had kept from advancing. William Craft added an important caveat to the discourse on black capacity when he advised an audience “that there was just as much difference between individual Africans as between individual Englishmen” and “all Englishmen were not Shakespeares.”¹²⁵ Even as he acted as the slaves’ representative, Craft attempted to make the public understand that one individual *could not* represent the whole. Only when whites stopped thinking in terms of the

¹²¹ Frederick Douglass, “American Prejudice and Southern Religion: An Address Delivered in Hingham, Massachusetts, on 4 November 1841, in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 12.

¹²² *Liberator*, September 5, 1862.

¹²³ Document 47: William Craft to Editor, *London Morning Advertiser*, September 1852, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 320.

¹²⁴ Frederick Douglass, “The Slanderous Charge of Negro Inferiority: An Address Delivered in Belfast, Ireland, on 11 December 1845,” in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 98-99.

¹²⁵ Craft, William. “Remarks at meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1863,” in Black Abolitionist Archive, Special Collections, University of Detroit Mercy, <https://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/index.php> (19 March 2017) [hereafter UDM “Black Abolitionist Archive”].

undifferentiated “millions” and considered individual black men, women, and children, would they fathom the collective toll which slavery took or the capacity of those held within it.

Unlike white rhetoricians, fugitive activists did not always feel compelled to linger on the most brutal and degrading aspects of slavery. Rather, they drew attention to the ways in which even the best-treated slave was still a human being kept against his or her will.¹²⁶ In an 1851 address, William Craft denied that there were slaves so well cared for that they could be “happy” in captivity:

There was, it was true, a difference in the condition of the slaves ... some were better fed and better clothed than others, and were not ill-used and flogged so much – but they were slaves still. (Hear.) God created man for higher purposes than the mere regard of what he should eat and drink. He has a higher destiny and should have nobler aspirations.¹²⁷

In this statement, William not only refuted pro-slavery claims that slaves did not mind their condition, but also effectively rejected Lydia Maria Child’s assertion that the happiness of slaves was like that of “well fed pigs.”¹²⁸ Slaves, Craft insisted, were not animals but men, and “God forbid that there should exist any in man’s form so base, or low, so wretched, & degraded as to be content” in being subject to another’s will in all things.¹²⁹ In the Crafts’ 1861 narrative, William spoke for himself and

¹²⁶ White abolitionists also engaged in this argument at times, as when Lydia Maria Child argued that “the great question was not one of treatment, but of *principle*.” Fugitive activists made a larger point, however, by showing that individuals held within slavery were conscious of the wrong done to them even when their treatment was relatively decent, thus refuting the idea that slaves, like animals, cared only for their most basic needs. Minutes for the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women: 1837, New York, NY, in *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in the City of New-York, May 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th, 1837* (William S. Dorr, New York, NY, 1837).

¹²⁷ Document 38: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at Plymouth Theatre, Plymouth, England, 30 April 1851, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 271-272.

¹²⁸ Lydia Maria Child to Caroline Weston, Northampton, 27 July 1838, in *LMC Letters*, 81.

¹²⁹ Document 38: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at Plymouth Theatre, Plymouth, England, 30 April 1851, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 272.

Ellen when he wrote that, even though their “condition as slaves was not by any means the worst,” the knowledge that they could call neither their “bones and sinews” nor any “new-born babe” their own was more than enough to make them long for freedom.¹³⁰

Ellen Craft also had cause to correct public misconceptions about slaves’ contentment in bondage. In 1852 she wrote to an editor to correct the “erroneous report” that she was in search of a way to return to slavery in America, purportedly having realized that freedom was not all she hoped for. Dismissing the rumor outright, Ellen wrote, “I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent.”¹³¹

Although she was addressing hearsay about her personally, Ellen’s refutation effectively attacked pro-slavery arguments about slaves’ happiness in bondage and their superior treatment in comparison to wage laborers. William Craft similarly denied the existence of well-treated and contented slaves in response to an article which he believed was “fully capable of misleading and prejudicing” the public mind on the issue of slavery. Craft scoffed at the article’s claim that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* contained “... over-strained conclusions and violent extremes.”¹³² In a later speech, Craft attacked this idea as one espoused by many of slavery’s “apologists,” saying that of all the books he had read on the subject of slavery, “he had never seen a description in print which could, in the remotest degree, approach to the reality of

¹³⁰ Craft, *Running*, 1.

¹³¹ Document 49: Ellen Craft to Editor, *Anti-Slavery Advocate*, 26 October 1852, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 330.

¹³² Document 47: William Craft to Editor, *London Morning Advertiser*, September 1852, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 316.

the thing itself.”¹³³ Craft claimed an authority based on his own intimate knowledge of the institution and on his intellectual ability to survey the literature and judge it for himself, offering his expert opinion to the public.

Fugitive activists also engaged with the idea of the slave family’s vulnerability. Lydia Maria Child exclaimed that whites “could not wonder at it” if slaves were “destitute of feeling” for one another, for “Who could expect the kindly affections to expand in such an atmosphere!”¹³⁴ But again and again in their presentations to the public, fugitive slaves revealed the depth of their attachment to spouses, children, and family. In the revised version of his narrative, Henry “Box” Brown expressed the “agony” he felt when his wife and children were stolen from him and sent “to toil beneath the scorching rays of a hot sun deprived of a husband’s and a father’s care.”¹³⁵ Only the coldest heart could doubt the strength of slaves’ feelings for each other after reading of the way Brown walked beside his wife in the slave coffle for “four miles hand in hand, ... both [their] hearts ... so overpowered ... that [they] could say nothing.”¹³⁶ Jacobs wrote of “refugee women” in the contraband camps who were always ready to take “helpless little ones into their own poor hovels” when there were orphans in need. “O, when,” she asked, “will the white man learn to know the hearts of my abused and suffering people!”¹³⁷ In her narrative, she reminded readers that however “degraded by the system” a slave

¹³³ Document 79: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at Spafields Chapel, London, England, 14 October 1859, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 467.

¹³⁴ Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, 201.

¹³⁵ Brown, *Narrative* (1851), 52.

¹³⁶ Brown, *Narrative* (1851), 54.

¹³⁷ *Liberator*, April 10, 1863.

woman was, she was still “capable of feeling a mother’s agonies.”¹³⁸ William Craft told readers that he and Ellen were “haunted” by “the fact that another man had the power to tear from [their] cradle [any] new-born babe” they might be blessed with.¹³⁹ It was the burden of this knowledge, in fact, that drove them to reach for freedom. Fugitives’ testimony demonstrated that slavery had not brutalized blacks to the point of annihilating human affections and attachments. Bondage was an obstacle to the security of families, but not to slaves’ desire to create lasting bonds.

Fugitive activists also communicated ideas about African Americans’ ability to perform gender roles according to white middle-class standards. In the narrative of their lives, recounted on stage and in print, William Craft added details to show that he was industrious enough as a slave to earn the money needed for their escape and that, after reaching the North, he and his wife took up gender-appropriate work to “gain a respectable livelihood” – William “as a cabinet-maker and [Ellen] as a seamstress.”¹⁴⁰ Douglass and Brown also emphasized their industriousness before and after escape in their performances.¹⁴¹ In this way, they communicated to audiences that freed people could become productive members of society and that freedmen, whose “manhood” was threatened by their inability to protect families

¹³⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 16.

¹³⁹ Craft, *Running*, 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ Quote from Document 38: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at Plymouth Theatre, Plymouth, England, 30 April 1851, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 275. Also see Craft, William, “Great Anti-Slavery Meeting” pub. April 19, 1851 in *Plymouth and Devenport Weekly Meeting*, in UDM “Black Abolitionist Archive;” Story of Ellen Crafts from the *Boston Chronotype*, reprinted in *Wisconsin Free Democrat*, July 11, 1849, Reel 6, fr. 38, *BAP* microfilm; *The North Star* (Rochester, New York), August 24, 1849 in *African American Newspapers: The 19th Century*, Accessible Archives, Inc. Online Database, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, IA, July 2007.

¹⁴¹ Brown, *Narrative* (1849), 49-51; Brown, Henry Box: *Emancipator*, June 7, 1849, “Thrilling Narrative” in UDM “Black Abolitionist Archive;” Douglass, *Narrative*, in *Autobiographies*, 86-87, 95; Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 364-365.

under slavery, could shoulder the responsibility of providing for their households.¹⁴² As fugitive activists, Douglass, Craft, and Brown effectively constructed a positive black manhood by portraying themselves and, by extension, other black men, as capable, self-sufficient, and productive members of society.

Ellen Craft's performance on the antislavery stage made a similar contribution to the construction of a positive black womanhood. Audiences eager to see and hear a "white slave" clamored for Ellen's appearance on stage despite white middle-class standards of respectability which frowned on women taking a public role. Ellen often denied audiences this voyeurism by controlling the terms of her interaction with the public. When she did appear on stage, she almost always remained in the background while William spoke.¹⁴³ In this way, she afforded herself the same protection from the public eye which the separate spheres were supposed to offer white women.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, her avoidance of the public gaze did not equal an avoidance of political debate. In private meetings and informal groups, Ellen took a much more active role in relating the story of her experience in slavery and engaging in debate regarding the institution itself.¹⁴⁵ In

¹⁴² Document 47: William Craft to Editor, *London Morning Advertiser*, September 1852, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 320.

¹⁴³ Quote from *Liberator*, February 16, 1849. On audience interest in Ellen and her typical on-stage role, see *Liberator*, February 16, March 2, and May 11, 1849; March 7, 1851; *Gloucester Journal*, 24/5/51, in *The William and Ellen Craft Papers* (University of Pittsburgh, [s.l.: s.n.], 1978) [hereafter *Craft Papers*]; *The Bridgewater Times*, 15/5/51, in *Craft Papers*; Document 32: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at the Nicolson Street Church, Edinburgh, Scotland, 30 December 1850, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 246.

¹⁴⁴ Peterson, "Doers of the Word," 19-22.

¹⁴⁵ "Testimony of William and Ellen Craft Respecting the Boston Abolitionists," Report of the Bristol and Clifton Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society (1852), 22-23, in *Craft Papers*; *FreedMan*, 1/3/67 in *Craft Papers*; William Wells Brown, *The Travels of William Wells Brown: including Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, and The American Fugitive in Europe, Sketches of Places and People Abroad*, ed. Paul Jefferson (New York: Markus Wiener Pub., 1991), 156, 219-220; "Ellen Craft," *The*

this way, she negotiated a compromise between white middle-class standards of female respectability and the duty which many black women felt to publicly advocate for abolition and black rights.¹⁴⁶

Jacobs constructed a somewhat different model of black womanhood in her own abolitionist work. Even more than Ellen Craft, she avoided having a physical presence on the antislavery stage by engaging the public through writing rather than public appearances. Keeping some aspects of her identity private was one way of maintaining a boundary between the private and public spheres of her life. In her narrative, Jacobs addressed the question of black female respectability explicitly when she wrote about her relationship with her master. She challenged the notion that slavery had the power to define her, or her identity as a woman, when she described her master's attempts to overpower her. She does not characterize herself as helpless to resist him, but rather shows her visceral rejection of his attempts to tell her who and what she is:

When he *told* me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong. ... The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.¹⁴⁷

Elsewhere in the narrative, Jacobs uses this same language to communicate to the reader that there was a difference between being *told* she "was his property" and "subject to his will" and actually accepting her powerlessness to thwart those

Congregationalist (Boston, MA), January 25, 1867; *Liberator*, March 25, 1853; C. Peter Ripley, "Introduction," *BAP*, vol. 1, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Peterson, "*Doers of the Word*," 15-16, 19-22, 119-120; Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 4-8, 40-41.

¹⁴⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 18-19. Italics added.

claims.¹⁴⁸ Historian Sharon Block has insightfully argued that part of servile women's power to resist was their power to define acts of coercion as just that. By thwarting her master's attempt to isolate her in vulnerable settings, telling her mistress and family about the unwanted attention and abuse, and constantly rejecting the man's attempts to make her seem a willing party, Jacobs limited her master's ability to define their relationship as consensual and thereby struck a blow to his power.¹⁴⁹

Implicit in Jacobs' challenge to her master's absolute authority was a critique of the white abolitionist vision of the female slave as powerless, degraded, and "melted in sensuality" by virtue of their constant sexual exploitation.¹⁵⁰ While some white activists imagined that enslaved women were "allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame," Jacobs insisted on the important distinction between having an immoral act forced upon oneself and sacrificing one's own morality.¹⁵¹ Jacobs took her lessons in virtue from her grandmother, who "instilled" her with "pure principles," and not from her associations with the man who sought only to "corrupt" her.¹⁵² Furthermore, she argued that enslaved women could believe in and cherish such "principles" even as they found it necessary to betray them. When she looked back on the extramarital affair which she chose in place of submission to her master, she wrote that "It seems less degrading to give

¹⁴⁸ Quotes from Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27. For similar language, also see Jacobs, *Incidents*, 28, 76.

¹⁴⁹ Sharon Block, "Lines of Color, Sex and Service: Comparative Sexual Coercion in Early America," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 145-148.

¹⁵⁰ *Liberator*, April 23, 1852.

¹⁵¹ Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, 19.

¹⁵² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

one's self, than to submit to compulsion."¹⁵³ She admonished her readers "that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the standards of others" because she was not "sheltered" and "protected" as white women were.¹⁵⁴ Jacobs asked her public to acknowledge that enslaved women might still struggle to maintain independent identities in the midst of their peculiar hardships and effectively constructed an alternative standard of female respectability.

Fugitive slave activists complicated antislavery rhetoric by moving beyond white abolitionists' disempowering images of slaves as helpless and degraded victims. In their presentations to the public, fugitives drew attention away from slaves' utter victimhood by insisting on their shared humanity with whites, the immorality of human bondage regardless of how slaves were treated, and the fallacy of seeing slaves' degradation as a natural state. To counter the image of the kneeling and supplicant slave, fugitives constructed images of strong, industrious, and independent blacks who were capable of exercising agency and caring for themselves. While white abolitionist rhetoric imagined that enslaved men and women were incapable of fulfilling proper gender roles, fugitive activists affirmed their masculinity and femininity by speaking about the value of families, the duties of a father and husband, and the female slave's desire to protect her children. More than simply telling their own stories, fugitives constructed empowering images of enslaved men and women and, by extension, the race as a whole, for antislavery audiences.

¹⁵³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 56, 54.

Navigating the Antislavery Stage: Fugitive Activists' Experience

Fugitive activists faced a number of challenges while performing on the antislavery stage, many of which centered on the question of whether they possessed the authority to represent slavery, slaves, and their own lives in the ways that they chose to. While to some degree this about the choices they made as “representatives of the race” on stage, the ways in which fugitive activists used their personal stories and lives as representations of something greater means that challenges to their authority also struck at them as individuals. A central part of fugitive activists' experience involved dealing with the tension between their individual and public identities in a context where individual choices often had implications which extended far beyond one's private life. Although the historical record makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly how fugitives felt about the public role they occupied, examining the ways in which their authority as individuals and activists was questioned allows one to recreate the context in which they lived and worked and to consider the likely impact of the attendant pressures. However public their responses may have been, tracing fugitives' reactions to specific challenges also provides some insight into the ways in which they attempted to ameliorate their sometimes contentious experience on the antislavery stage.

The first challenge to fugitives' authority was based on the doubt of abolitionists and the public alike as to the authenticity of their personal histories under slavery. This was made manifest in the insistence of white abolitionists on verifying the authenticity of their stories of enslavement and escape. According to John Sekora, when white abolitionists encountered what might be a “usable black

story,” their first step was to investigate basic questions in order to establish its authenticity: “Did the subject actually exist? Was he or she actually a slave? Were the names, dates, places of the story factually reliable?”¹⁵⁵ With southerners producing their own propaganda about the benevolence of chattel slavery, it was important for their opponents to ensure that the information they gave the public could withstand charges of falsehood and exaggeration.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, however, these interrogations presented a fundamental challenge to fugitives as individuals by questioning the truth of the lives they led in slavery.

White abolitionists tried to reassure the public about the accuracy of fugitives’ stories by offering white testimony in support of them. Early publicity regarding the Crafts’ escape story was accompanied by assurances that “any lingering doubt ... as to the credibility of the story of this fugitive pair” would be allayed by a southern newspaper report which confirmed sightings of the “strange pair” on their journey north.¹⁵⁷ In the case of “Box” Brown, the “marvelous escape” was made believable by the presence of multiple white abolitionists at his release from the box which carried him to Philadelphia.¹⁵⁸ When others related Brown’s story to audiences early on, they included the perspective of James Miller McKim, the white abolitionist who anticipated Brown’s arrival and the opening of the box with great anxiety, thereby reminding listeners that a respectable member of the

¹⁵⁵ Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 497. Literary scholar William L. Andrews recounts the interrogation which fugitive Henry Bibb underwent when doubts arose about his life story. The documents and testimonials Bibb collected in his defense, including letters from two former owners, were later appended to his published narrative. See Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 106-107.

¹⁵⁶ Theodore Dwight Weld speaks to this directly in his introduction to *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, in Lowance, *Against Slavery*, 225-226.

¹⁵⁷ *Liberator*, February 9, 1849.

¹⁵⁸ *Liberator*, June 15, 1849.

community had been involved in the far-fetched plan.¹⁵⁹ This white presence was also reproduced in the multiple drawings and engravings of Brown's "unboxing" which were printed in newspapers, Brown's narrative, and various antislavery tracts.¹⁶⁰ While such efforts may have satisfied audiences, they also de-authorized the fugitive by requiring his or her authentication by a third party.

The white-authored testimony which usually accompanied published slave narratives also served to introduce and authenticate the fugitive before his or her readership.¹⁶¹ While it was typical for a narrative to include a preface or introduction by a white abolitionist and letters or documents which spoke to the accuracy of the narrative's facts or the good character of its narrator, it is worth noting the variations to this model which sometimes occurred. Lydia Maria Child once lamented that Garrison had written a "Preface" for Douglass's narrative rather than letting his work speak for itself, but she was willing to write an "Introduction" to Harriet Jacobs' narrative, perhaps because of the publisher's wish that "some one known to the public" be associated with the book in order to boost sales.¹⁶² Nonetheless, it is Jacobs' own "Preface" which directly precedes the body of the narrative and within it she effectively authenticates herself by relating the circumstances of and motivations for the text's authorship. At the same time, she establishes *herself* as the authority by reminding readers that "Only by experience

¹⁵⁹ *Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

¹⁶⁰ For images, see Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 64, 82, 113, 114, 148, 164; *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1850 in *African American Newspapers: The 19th Century*, Accessible Archives, Inc. Online Database, University of Iowa Library, Iowa City, IA, July 2007.

¹⁶¹ Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 54-55.

¹⁶² Lydia Maria Child to Louisa Loring, New York, 22 June 1845 in *LMC Letters*, 223; Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, October 8, 186-?, Reel 16, fr. 686, *BAP* microfilm.

can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations” which is slavery.¹⁶³ The Crafts’ narrative is remarkable for being absent of any white-authored testimonials. While this may be partly due to the fact that the Crafts and their story had been known to the public for several years by the time of the narrative’s publication, it still seems telling that William Craft felt the book needed no introduction but his own when that was anything but typical for the genre. Controlling some or all of the terms on which their work was contextualized for the public was one way for fugitive activists to overcome challenges to their authenticity and authority.

Fugitive activists also faced challenges to their authenticity directly from audience members. At a public gathering, one man demanded that William Craft answer questions about Georgia and his hometown of Macon in order to prove that he had lived there as a slave.¹⁶⁴ “Box” Brown was challenged by an audience member who wanted to know whether Brown actually knew where the Dismal Swamp, pictured in his panorama as a dangerous hideout for runaways, was located. When Brown answered with uncertainty, the editor relating the exchange exclaimed, “Such is the character of the [whole] panorama.”¹⁶⁵ If Brown did not have personal or precise knowledge of one of the images represented in his panorama, the editor seemed to suggest, then his knowledge of the other aspects of

¹⁶³ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 1-2. Jacobs also shaped the presentation of her narrative by choosing who would write a testimonial in support of her narrative. She asked her close friend Amy Post to write the letter which the publishers desired because she wanted someone who truly knew her to be the one to attest to her character. Going further than that, she directed Post as to what aspects of her life the letter should attest to. See Harriet Jacob to Amy Post, June 2, 18-- , Reel 16, fr. 676, *BAP* microfilm; Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, May 18, 186-?, Reel 16, fr. 690, *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁶⁴ *Liberator*, February 16 and March 2, 1849.

¹⁶⁵ *The Times* (London), July 30, 1852.

slavery represented therein might be just as precarious. Literary scholar Lisa Brawley suggests that one of the functions of slave narratives was to provide readers who had never visited the South with an armchair traveler's view of its physical and social landscape, thereby helping them to conceptualize "the South" as a region distinct from "the North."¹⁶⁶ Perhaps this explains in part why some members of the public were at least as concerned with a fugitive's ability to reconstruct the details of a place as they were with his or her larger story. For most northerners, the southern institution of plantation slavery was a foreign practice which occurred in a foreign landscape and they needed both experience and setting to be authenticated in order to accept a fugitive's story. The result for fugitive activists was that their performances sometimes turned into audience-led interrogations which distracted from the most significant messages of their stories.

Fugitive activists often carried letters of introduction and support with them when they travelled the lecture circuit in order to assure locals that theirs was a legitimate enterprise and a truthful narrative.¹⁶⁷ "Box" Brown wrote to request such a letter from Gerrit Smith before he and J.C.A. Smith sailed for London with the intention of touring with Brown's panorama. While Brown recognized the importance of having documentation to prove that he was who he said he was, he also resented the idea that he should need testimony regarding his quality as a

¹⁶⁶ Lisa Brawley, "Frederick Douglass's 'My Bondage and My Freedom' and the Fugitive Tourist Industry," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 98-128.

¹⁶⁷ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, 23 May 18-- , reel 16, fr. 669, *BAP* microfilm; Brown, *Narrative* (1851), 10-13; Special Report of the Bristol and Clifton Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society : During Eighteen Months, from January 1851 to June, 1852 : with a Statement of the Reasons of its Separation from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (London: Bristol: John Snow, Paternoster-Row; W. Whereat, Corn-St, 1852), 10-14.

person. After requesting a letter of verification from James Miller McKim, Brown sought to correct McKim's impulse to make statements about his character, writing, "I only wrote to you for a few lines as I know you know me to be the very man that came in the box. ... I don't wish you to give that character which you know nothing of."¹⁶⁸ In this way, Brown contested the idea that those who did not know him had a right to judge his quality simply because they were white.

Whether fugitive activists appreciated whites' testaments to their good nature or not, they frequently found their characters, intelligence, manners, and appearance being vouched for. While some of this was by way of introducing a friend or associate to an activist they knew nothing about, such testaments suggest that white abolitionists felt the need to assure new contacts that fugitive speakers "had proved themselves worthy in all respects."¹⁶⁹ Press coverage of fugitives' speaking engagements sometimes served the same purpose for the public at large. Reporters assured readers that William Craft "speaks good English" and that, despite being "very dark," he had "a reflective, intelligent countenance."¹⁷⁰ William's physical appearance was noted in contrast to that of light-skinned Ellen, who was sometimes described as though her skin color was testament enough to her character and the truth of her story. In such instances, writers seemed to try to qualify William's appearance by clarifying that he had positive qualities despite his skin color. One writer went so far as to say that "though [he] was quite dark enough

¹⁶⁸ Henry Box Brown to James Miller McKim, 3 April 1850, reel 6, fr. 431, *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁶⁹ Special Report of the Bristol and Clifton Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, 1851-1852," 11.

¹⁷⁰ *New Hampshire Statesman*, February 31, 1851; Interview of William and Ellen Craft from Chamber's *Edinburgh Journal*, in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 273-274.

to pass for a slave, [he] had a certain self-poised dignity about him, and Caucasian rather than Negro features.”¹⁷¹ This type of description, also apparent in the press coverage of other fugitive activists, only served to strengthen the notion that the link between phenotype, status, and character was essentially fixed by drawing attention to the anomaly writers perceived in an enslaved black who was also upright and intelligent.

Frederick Douglass faced a similar challenge based on the white public’s belief that a man with his eloquence and intelligence could never have been a slave.¹⁷² His 1845 narrative, which included the typical white-authored testimonials, was actually written in order to assuage doubts regarding his history in bondage. According to Douglass, the public was suspicious of him, saying, “He don’t tell us where he came from – what his master’s name was – how he got away – nor the story of his experience. Besides, he is educated, and is, in this, a contradiction of all the facts we have concerning the ignorance of the slaves.”¹⁷³ Douglass had revealed at least some of these details to abolitionists when he first came to the attention of Garrison, but all agreed that it was safer for Douglass and those who had helped him if he did not publicize identifying information to those who sought his recapture.¹⁷⁴ Only continuing accusations that he was an impostor led Douglass to pen the narrative of his experience as a slave. While he potentially

¹⁷¹ Vincent Y. Bowditch, *Life and Correspondence of Henry Ingersoll Bowditch*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), 205.

¹⁷² Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 367-368; Douglass, “The Cambria Riot, My Slave Experience, and My Irish Mission: An Address Delivered in Belfast, Ireland, on 5 December 1845,” in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 89; Lampe, *Frederick Douglass*, 226.

¹⁷³ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 367-368.

¹⁷⁴ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 367-368; Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq. to Frederick Douglass, Boston, April 22, 1845, in Douglass, *Narrative*, in *Autobiographies*, 12.

risked himself by revealing his history, Douglass denied his readers a voyeuristic glimpse at his actual flight to the free states in order to protect those slaves who might pursue a similar means from added vigilance by the authorities.¹⁷⁵

Douglass's experience on the antislavery stage suggests that he was being judged against the public's preconceived ideas of what a slave should be. Lisa Brawley argues that northerners' preconceptions about racial characteristics derived primarily from minstrelsy during this period. Thus, when white audiences came to hear a fugitive speak, they did so with the expectation that he or she perform race and slavery in the same way that whites in blackface did, based on stereotype and exaggeration. Scholar Sarah Meer argues that the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also shaped whites' expectations of how a slave should look and act. Thus, fugitive activists' "lives and experiences were measured against Stowe's fiction."¹⁷⁶ Douglass met with suspicion precisely because he failed to deliver on the audience's anticipation of a slave caricature. His entourage urged him to perform within the limits of the public's expectations, advising, "Better to have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned." Stephen A. Collins told him, "Be yourself," but that advice seemed based on the presumption that the eloquent and skilled rhetorician Douglass had become was not, in fact, his true self. While he shared the concern that audiences would doubt his story, Douglass chafed at the idea of limiting himself to a "simple narrative" when he felt he "must speak just the word that seemed to [*him*] the word

¹⁷⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, in *Autobiographies*, 84-85.

¹⁷⁶ Brawley, "Frederick Douglass's 'My Bondage and My Freedom' and the Fugitive Tourist Industry," 108-109; Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 16, 178-179.

to be spoken *by* [him].” When white abolitionists encouraged Douglass to play the part of a former slave in a way the audience would recognize and trust, they effectively tried to limit him and his public persona to the disempowered and degraded stereotype with which white audiences were familiar.¹⁷⁷

White abolitionists’ commitment to the idea that legal status defined identity is evidenced in Henry C. Wright’s apparent concern that Douglass would no longer be useful to the cause if he allowed friends to purchase his freedom. Wright seemed to assume that Douglass’s utility rested solely in being a “specimen of the peculiar property of the South.”¹⁷⁸ If he was no longer legally bound, what role could he play in the movement? Douglass responded by telling Wright, “I anticipate no such change in my position as you predict. I shall be Frederick Douglass still, and once a slave still. ... My knowledge of slavery will be the same, and my hatred of it will be the same.” Douglass rejected attempts to define him entirely in terms of his previous condition of servitude. He also reminded Wright that his antislavery activism was never limited to a recitation of his personal suffering in slavery; his authority to speak was informed by, but not confined to, his own experience as a slave.¹⁷⁹

Douglass resisted having either his manner of delivery or the story he told controlled by others. Collins told him, “Give us the facts [and] we will take care of the philosophy.” But as Douglass put it, “It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate*

¹⁷⁷ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 367.

¹⁷⁸ *Liberator*, February 9, 1849.

¹⁷⁹ *The North American* (Philadelphia, PA), November 28, 1846; Frederick Douglass to Henry C. Wright, 22 St. Ann’s Square, Manchester, December 22, 1846, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 205.

wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them.”¹⁸⁰ A survey of Douglass’s earliest speeches shows that although he explicitly claimed an authority to speak based on his experience in slavery, he spoke as a witness to the system itself and not as one who wished to share his own sufferings within it.¹⁸¹ Douglass had both to defend the authenticity of his experience in slavery and the legitimacy of his choice to move beyond that experience in his antislavery work. He effectively contested audiences’ desire to see and hear him only as a slave by distancing himself from the details of his own personal history of enslavement and challenging audiences to receive him on his own terms.

Other fugitive activists also faced challenges regarding how their stories should be told. When Jacobs first decided to break her public silence, she approached Harriet Beecher Stowe to see if the famed author would write her story. Jacobs may have hoped that giving her story to the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would give it a much wider audience than she could hope for herself. She nonetheless imagined it as a cooperative effort, the story written based on her narration and organized into multiple volumes as she saw fit.¹⁸² Jacobs’ close friend, Amy Post, made the request to Stowe on her behalf, but Stowe’s response was not at all what Jacobs had hoped for. While Stowe had no interest in writing a full-length narrative of Jacobs’ life in slavery, she did write to Jacobs’ long-time employer, Mrs. Willis, to have her confirm certain facts so that she might use them in her own book,

¹⁸⁰ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 367.

¹⁸¹ See, for example, Frederick Douglass, “I Have Come to Tell You Something About Slavery: An Address Delivered in Lynn, Massachusetts in October, 1841” in *FD Papers*, Series 1, vol. 1, 3-5.

¹⁸² Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, -- 19, 18—[n.d. #84], Reel 16, fr. 700, *BAP* microfilm.

A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹⁸³ Thus Mrs. Stowe, a free white woman, asked Mrs. Willis, another free white woman and the wife of a pro-slavery sympathizer, to verify the story of an escaped slave woman in order that Jacobs' story might be used to authenticate Stowe's fictional tale of slavery; one wonders whether the irony was lost on Jacobs.¹⁸⁴ Jacobs did, at any rate, strongly object to the idea of her history being used in this way and asked Mrs. Willis to write Stowe, "begging that she would not use any of the facts in her key." Jacobs "wished it to be a history of [her] life entirely by itself which would do more good and it needed no romance" to do so.¹⁸⁵ Stowe's attempt to control the terms on which Jacobs' story reached the public was what made Jacobs realize that she must tackle the task herself. Writing to Amy Post, Jacobs declared, "I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself." Ever modest regarding her own writing ability, she promised Post "you shall have truth but not talent God did not give me that gift [of eloquence] but he gave me a soul that burned for freedom."¹⁸⁶ Any reader of Jacobs' narrative knows that she possessed both. The way in which Stowe chose to handle Jacobs' request for assistance represented a fundamental challenge to Jacobs' authenticity and

¹⁸³ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, April 4, [1853], Reel 16, fr. 681, *BAP* microfilm; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1853). Shortly after Amy Post wrote to Stowe, Jacobs learned that Stowe would soon be travelling to Britain. Jacobs asked Mrs. Willis to write to Stowe, requesting that Louisa, Jacobs' daughter, be allowed to accompany her in order to expand her horizons and contribute to the antislavery cause. When Stowe wrote to Willis, she enclosed Post's letter and responded to both requests. See Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 120-121. Yellin's biography of Jacobs is a path breaking study which does much to illuminate the intricacies of Jacobs' private and public lives.

¹⁸⁴ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, -- 19, 18—[n.d. #84], Reel 16, fr. 700, *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁸⁵ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, April 4, [1853], Reel 16, fr. 681-683, *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁸⁶ Document 7: Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, Oct 9th [1853], in Jacobs, *Incidents*, 258.

authority, but Jacobs forcefully defended both when she refused to allow her history to be used as another interesting anecdote in Stowe's latest book.

One of the reasons that Jacobs remained publicly silent about her particular experience in slavery for so long was her own fear of what telling "the whole truth" would do to her reputation.¹⁸⁷ No sooner had she set foot in the free states than she was warned not to "answer every body so openly" regarding her extramarital affair with the father of her children lest it give "some heartless people a pretext for treating [her] with contempt." "That word *contempt*," Jacobs wrote in her narrative, "burned me like coals of fire," but in the years to come it also made her doubt whether the public could see past her surface transgression and understand the system which had necessitated it. "[I]f it was the life of a Heroine with no degradation associated with it," it might have been an easier story to tell, but it would not have done as much to educate the public about women's actual experience in slavery.¹⁸⁸

Jacobs ultimately decided that silence carried greater risks than exposure, but she made other choices that afforded her some protection from the "contempt" which might accompany a public role. Several scholars suggest that Jacobs' use of the pseudonym "Linda Brent," in addition to protecting her and her family from their former owners, allowed her to distance her present self from the past self she was describing. In this way, she was able to insulate herself from assaults on her

¹⁸⁷ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, -- 19, 18—[n.d. #84], Reel 16, fr. 700 in *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁸⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 160-161; Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, -- 19, 18—[n.d. #84], Reel 16, fr. 700 in *BAP* microfilm.

reputation.¹⁸⁹ She also distanced herself from that history by choosing to not recite the wrongs done to her before a live audience. Following its publication in 1861, Jacobs let the narrative speak for itself and engaged in a more anonymous activism by helping newly freed refugees in the South. Thereafter when she addressed the public it was not in order to tell her own story, but rather to plead the case of the slave population then entering freedom.¹⁹⁰ Within the narrative itself, Jacobs preemptively addressed questions regarding reputation and individual morality when she told readers “that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” since her virtue was not afforded the same protection:¹⁹¹

... O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery.¹⁹²

Jacobs defended her reputation by showing her imagined audience that what separated them was not individual morality but the reality of being subject to another’s will; if they felt “contempt,” it should not be for her but for the institution of slavery.

“Box” Brown also had to deal with concerns regarding his reputation. The editor who questioned the veracity of Brown’s panorama because he could not give the precise location of the Dismal Swamp wrote two lengthy diatribes against

¹⁸⁹ Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 86; Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 240-241; Peterson, “*Doers of the Word*,” 152.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example, Harriet Jacobs to J. Sella Martin, April 13, 1863, Alexandria Virginia, in Reel 14, fr. 799, *BAP* microfilm.

¹⁹¹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, 55.

¹⁹² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

Brown's work for the *Wolverhampton & Staffordshire Herald* in Britain. T. H. Brindley, the *Herald's* editor, derided Brown on a professional level when he called his presentation "a gross and palpable exaggeration" of American slavery. Brindley advised "caution [to] those who may attend to expect only amusement, as the horrors, related in the richest nigger style, are as good as a pantomime." But Brindley attacked Brown on a personal level when he expressed "disgust at the foppery, conceit, vanity, and egotistical stupidity of the Box Brown school." In his second article, "THE NIGGER PANORAMA," Brindley mocked Brown's personal appearance and demeanor, calling him "obese," "bejeweled and oily," and "semi-baboonish."¹⁹³ In order to assure readers that he was not misrepresenting Brown, the editor reproduced what he called a "*verbatim* specimen" of Brown's speech, in the process giving Brown a broken dialect which he did not possess.¹⁹⁴ Brindley attempted to undermine Brown's authority by raising doubts about the accuracy of his representation of slavery, but also by reducing Brown to a mere caricature. Brown responded to this attack on his character by filing a libel suit against the *Herald*, arguing that the articles had cost him in ticket sales and eventually driven

¹⁹³ *The Times* (London), July 30, 1852.

¹⁹⁴ A reporter who heard Brown testify at his libel suit wrote that Brown's "manner of giving his evidence was quiet and creditable; and his pronunciation altogether correct." Another gentleman who testified on Brown's behalf said that he had attended the panorama and said "that the plaintiff, in delivering his lecture, did not speak in the ridiculous manner imputed to him by the libels." *The Times* (London), July 30, 1852. Sojourner Truth also found her speaking style caricatured when Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote about her in "Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl." Nell Irvin Painter argues that Stowe "emphasizes Truth's Africanness & otherness" in this way, rendering her "a quaint and innocent exotic." Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 154. These examples suggest that some whites were so committed to their preconceptions of what a (former) slave was that they forced the black activists they encountered into that mold regardless of their actual comportment.

him from Wolverhampton altogether. The jury found in Brown's favor and awarded him 100 pounds in damages.¹⁹⁵

Brindley's attack on Brown seems clearly driven by racism, but Brown sometimes also faced criticisms regarding his self-presentation from fellow blacks. Commenting on Brown's libel suit in a letter to Wendell Phillips, William Wells Brown wrote that,

The editor was certainly to blame yet Brown is a very foolish fellow, to say the least, I saw him some time since and he had a gold ring on nearly every finger on each hand, and more gold and brass round his neck than would take to hang the biggest Aldersman in London, and as to ruffles about the shirts, he had enough to supply any old [maid] with cap stuff ... his whole appearance was that of a well dressed monkey.¹⁹⁶

William Wells Brown's dismissive description of "Box" Brown's appearance likely speaks to class tensions within the free black community. Black elites who embraced the "politics of respectability" believed that presenting an image of refinement would eventually raise whites' opinion of the race as a whole, but this was not a strategy which non-elite blacks always had the means or desire to employ.¹⁹⁷ Wells Brown may have worried that "Box" Brown's particular style was only offering support to the minstrelsy image of the black "dandy." The "dandy," sometimes embodied in the minstrel character of "Zip Coon," was mocked for

¹⁹⁵ *The Times* (London), July 30, 1852; *Frederick Douglass's Paper* (Rochester, New York), August 27, 1852 in *African American Newspapers*.

¹⁹⁶ William Wells Brown to Wendell Phillips, 1852, September 1, London, England, Reel 7, fr. 720, BAP microfilm.

¹⁹⁷ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 102-103; Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*, 157-208.

attempting to climb the social ladder by imitating the clothing and speech of whites in an exaggerated and foolhardy manner.¹⁹⁸

What Wells Brown failed to realize was that the way in which “Box” Brown chose to adorn himself could have a value independent of how it was received by the public. Like many free(d) blacks, Brown celebrated his new independence by using fine clothing and other ornamentation to express his individuality, “as if to obliterate the drudgery and submission required under slavery.”¹⁹⁹ For a fugitive slave who once wore only what humble clothing his master provided him and could claim no property as his own, proudly displaying one’s body in fine dress and jewelry was one way to embody freedom. Brown once described himself as “the African prince” in a handbill, suggesting that he may have consciously tried to use his dress to represent a powerful black figure in stark contrast to the derisive image of “Zip Coon.”²⁰⁰ Though never safe from challenges to his character, Brown steadfastly chose to exercise autonomy as he fashioned his own self-image on the antislavery stage.

Implicit in some of the criticisms of Brown’s regal appearance was the question of whether he was more interested in personal gain and showmanship

¹⁹⁸ See Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*, 161-164; White, *Stylin’*, 116-119; James H. Dormon, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988), 451; J. Stanley Lemons, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 102.

¹⁹⁹ Quote from Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 219. Similar arguments regarding the significance which dress, jewelry, and hairdressing had for some slaves, free blacks, and freedpeople may be found in Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 219-222; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, 79; and White, *Stylin’*, 2, 6-10, 16, 92-94.

²⁰⁰ Ruggles, *Unboxing of Henry Brown*, 151.

than in helping the antislavery cause. When Brown severed his business relationship with J.C.A. Smith, the man who first sealed him in the box which carried him to Philadelphia, Smith informed others that Brown was ungrateful to the abolitionists in America and was pursuing a course that would “not ... do the cause of humanity any good.”²⁰¹ While this accusation came from a fellow African American, fugitive activists frequently faced challenges from white abolitionists and members of the public who doubted whether their antislavery activism was truly selfless.²⁰² Even after the publication of his narrative, Douglass faced skepticism regarding his history and motives. As his stature as an antislavery lecturer and advocate rose, Douglass had to defend himself against the suspicions of fellow activists who “betray[ed] a want of confidence in [him] as a man, and an abolitionist.”²⁰³ In 1854, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* carried an article entitled “Colored Lecturers – Caution,” which issued a blanket warning against black lecturers, any of whom might be falsifying their slave histories for profit according to the author.²⁰⁴ Questions regarding authenticity, for Douglass and other fugitive activists, represented a fundamental challenge to their ability to put their personal histories of slavery to public use.

²⁰¹ Document 43: J.C.A. Smith to Gerrit Smith, 6 August 1851, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 295-296. An inflammatory summary of Smith’s letter to Gerrit Smith was also printed in the press. See Reel 6, fr. 577, *BAP* microfilm.

²⁰² Sekora, “Black Message/ White Envelope,” 505.

²⁰³ Frederick Douglass to Mari (Weston) Chapman, Kilmarnock, Scotland, 29th March, 1846, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 142-143.

²⁰⁴ Document 60: J.C.A. Smith to Editor, *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 13 March 1854, in *BAP*, vol. 1, 383.

William Lloyd Garrison, who was instrumental in creating a space for fugitive slaves on the antislavery stage, nonetheless questioned whether fugitives' commitment to the cause was as altruistic as that of white abolitionists:

It does not follow, that, because a man is or has been a slave, or because he is identified with a class meted out and trodden under foot, therefore he will be the truest to the cause of human freedom ... Does it indicate the same regard for universal justice, for those who are oppressed to desire to gain their freedom, as it does for others, not of their complexion, and not involved in their suffering, to encounter deadly perils and make liberal sacrifices in seeking their liberation? The former may be animated by motives limited to a narrow selfishness; the latter must be actuated by feelings of disinterested benevolence and world-wide philanthropy.²⁰⁵

Garrison was correct to identify a potential difference in the type of commitment which black and white abolitionists had to the antislavery cause, but he clearly failed to understand the difference between having a personal stake in the outcome of the movement and using it for personal gain. Fugitive activists felt particularly entitled to plead the slaves' case precisely because they shared in their suffering and oppression, but they nonetheless faced opposition and suspicion from people who questioned their motives for action.²⁰⁶

The most significant challenge to William Craft's reputation did not occur until after emancipation had been achieved, but it nonetheless spoke to white activists' chronic failure to understand the ways in which activism could serve

²⁰⁵ Quoted from the *Liberator*, December 16, 1853, in "Letters to Antislavery Workers and Agencies, Part II," *Journal of Negro History* 10, no. 3 (July 1925), 383-384.

²⁰⁶ Douglass spoke to his sense of entitlement directly when he wrote, "Sir, I deem it neither arrogant nor presumptuous to assume to represent the three millions of my brethren, who are, while I am penning these words, in chains and slavery on the American soil ... I have been one with them in their sorrow and suffering - one with them in their ignorance and degradation - one with them under a burning sun and the slavedriver's bloody lash - ..." Frederick Douglass to Samuel Hanson Cox, D.D., Salisbury Road, Edinburgh, October 30, 1846, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 189.

personal and political purposes for blacks. After the Civil War, the Crafts returned to their native state of Georgia, where they established a cooperative farm on which they rented plots to local blacks, instructed in agricultural techniques, and provided education to children and adults.²⁰⁷ It was a difficult financial time for most freed people living in the South and the Crafts likewise struggled to improve conditions on the farm and provide adequately for its residents. After one of his trips north to solicit financial support, William was accused of seeking money for his own gain. His accuser published a warning that “The colored man, William Craft, now here asking for money for his school in Bryan county, Georgia, is asking under false colors. He and his family live on the money he collects every summer, and *not one cent* of it goes to any charitable purpose.”²⁰⁸ Those who rallied around this allegation misunderstood both the nature of Craft’s enterprise and the reality of cooperative farming. Craft was criticized for not providing land, education, and other services to his tenants free of charge, but he never claimed to be running a charity. He had, rather, attempted to create a favorable environment in which freed people could have access to land, education, and other resources without the extortion or violence they experienced when living and working among whites. Craft sought to teach the tenants of Woodville farm how to support themselves, not to provide hand-outs. The fact that some of the money which Craft raised went to

²⁰⁷ “An Undoubted Right,” *Harpers Weekly*, May 30, 1874, 451b. “Condition of the South,” *New York Times*, Dec 8, 1874; “Co-operation Among the Freedmen,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 15/5/69, in *Craft Papers*; “William Craft,” *The Bristol Friend*, 12th Month, 1st, 1868, page 295, in *Craft Papers*; “Georgia. The Condition and Wants of the Colored People of Georgia,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA), July 30, 1875; “Primary Education in Georgia,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 22, 1873; Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers*, 124-129.

²⁰⁸ “Mr. William Craft and His School in Georgia,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 21, 1876.

the support of his family should not have been cause for alarm since that money was for the maintenance of the farm and its residents, the Crafts numbering among them.²⁰⁹

Though Craft was now working to aid freed people and not slaves, this challenge to his reputation is evocative of a trend apparent in the earlier era of antislavery activism. During the heyday of the abolition movement, some whites expressed suspicion regarding black activists who tried to earn income from lectures and the sale of their narratives. Even performers whose histories of slavery had been verified risked being called “imposters.”²¹⁰ Fugitive activists had to find a way to support themselves while being active in the movement; commodifying their narratives and public performances was an obvious solution for many.²¹¹ Yet some white abolitionists interpreted this effort at self-support as a sign that fugitive activists had selfish motives and placed their own interests before those of the enslaved.²¹² The post-war attack on Craft’s reputation seems born of the same failure to understand that, without an independent source of wealth, black activists had to find a way to sustain themselves as they devoted time and energy to the cause. In more ways than one, fugitive activists’ interests were bound up with the

²⁰⁹ “The Craft-Naylor Suit,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1878; “The Craft Libel Suit,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 15, 1878; “The Craft Libel Suit,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 16, 1878.

²¹⁰ Frederick Douglass to Maria (Weston) Chapman, Kilmarnock, Scotland, 29th March, 1846, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 142-143; R.D. Webb to M.W. Chapman, Dublin, 29/5/53, MsA.q.2, V. 27 no. 39, Boston Public Library, in *Craft Papers*; Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 505; Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 108-109.

²¹¹ Ripley, “Introduction,” in *BAP*, vol. 1, 16, 20-21.

²¹² Frederick Douglass to Maria (Weston) Chapman, Kilmarnock, Scotland, 29th March, 1846, in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Early Years*, 142-143; R.D. Webb to M.W. Chapman, Dublin, 29/5/53, MsA.q.2, V. 27 no. 39, Boston Public Library, in *Craft Papers*; Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 505; Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 108-109.

interests of those they advocated for. Like Brown, Craft answered the attack on his reputation with a libel suit in which he defended the work he and his family did at Woodville farm. Unlike Brown, Craft lost the suit despite bringing extensive evidence to show that collected funds had been disposed of appropriately.²¹³ Whether this different outcome speaks to changing attitudes about race and black activism in the post-war period or not, the incident reminds us that challenges to independent black activism continued from one era to the next.

A central aspect of fugitive activists' experience on the antislavery stage was negotiating the many challenges made to their authenticity, authority, and self-representations. Yet it would be faulty to assume that the limitations which the public and fellow abolitionists tried to impose on individual activists were necessarily insurmountable. Douglass, Brown, the Crafts, and Jacobs did not allow themselves to be circumscribed or defined by the expectations of others. An examination of their response to different challenges shows that, despite living and working in a contentious environment, fugitive activists actively tried to assert authority over how their lives would be used to serve the antislavery cause and to defend their personal choices.

In the decades leading up to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolitionists waged a battle for the hearts and minds of the American and British public. In the process, they struggled to overcome white disinterest and apathy and

²¹³ "The Craft-Naylor Suit," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 08, 1878; "The Craft Libel Suit," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 15, 1878; "The Craft Libel Suit," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 16, 1878.

the influence of pro-slavery rhetoric on a populace whose racism and ignorance of slavery made it ever susceptible to the images of benign bondage propagated by the South. While white and black activists shared the obstacles described above, each group also faced peculiar challenges. As white abolitionists constructed a sympathetic image of the slave to spur the public to action, they struggled to define enslaved men and women as anything other than utterly degraded victims. This problem was partly the product of propaganda's tendency to focus on one extreme or another, but it may also have stemmed from white activists' failure to recognize the degree to which "racial prejudice ... was such a widespread popular belief that ... it even infected their own ranks."²¹⁴ Products of the society they hoped to change, white abolitionists necessarily struggled to imagine blacks or slaves as empowered, capable, independent adults. This failure created a distinct challenge for those blacks who came to occupy a public role in the abolition movement. In particular, fugitive slave activists struggled to communicate the immorality and brutality of slavery to audiences without sacrificing blacks' potential for individual agency and dignity.

Although black and white abolitionists both denounced bondage, their antislavery messages were neither identical nor interchangeable. Fugitive slaves, as speakers and writers, made a critical contribution to the antislavery campaign which went far beyond telling the "simple, artless narratives" which whites "had itching ears to hear."²¹⁵ In a society that (at best) questioned blacks' humanity and

²¹⁴ Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 237.

²¹⁵ *Liberator*, January 21, 1842; June 22, 1849.

capacity, fugitive slave activists claimed an authority to teach audiences about the institution of slavery, contradict and reject the opinions of misguided or malicious whites, and construct empowering images of black men and women, slave and free. In their work on the antislavery stage, fugitive activists effectively constructed a usable past out of their histories in slavery, a past which created the possibility for black men and women to enter freedom without rendering the lives they led up to that point illegitimate.

The messages that black and white activists communicated to the public about slavery, race, and emancipation likely had an impact on the way whites understood and responded to their changing society in the wake of the Civil War and legal emancipation. As northerners were confronted by a surging population of blacks fleeing the South and renewed calls for equal rights, it seems probable that their assumptions and expectations regarding freed blacks had some basis in the antebellum racial constructions promulgated by abolitionists. When fugitive activists constructed an empowering image of enslaved men and women, they forced the public to consider the individuality, humanity, and potential of those “who would be free.”²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Pease, *They Who Would Be Free*. Title case changed.

**CHAPTER TWO:
“[I]N THE LAND OF SLAVERY—FROM THE LIPS OF THE VICTIMS, AND
SURROUNDED BY THE SCENES OF THEIR SUFFERING”: REPRESENTING
SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN THE CONTRABAND CAMPS**

In the spring of 1861, Union General Benjamin F. Butler responded to the growing presence of fugitive slaves who sought protection at his camp by declaring them “contraband of war.” Thousands of slaves claimed the quasi-free status of “contraband” within weeks of Butler’s decision, as men, women, and children fled their masters and sought refuge behind Union lines. Congress sanctioned Butler’s policy in the First and Second Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862, which authorized the Union to confiscate any property, including slaves, owned by a Rebel and being used to aid the Confederate war effort.²¹⁷ This was the first time that human chattel were officially included within the category of enemy property subject to seizure in wartime. Contraband slaves played a central role in the drama of the Civil War, pushing the Union Army to take a stand on the issue of slavery; adding strength to the Union’s force of laborers and soldiers; and contributing to the destruction of slavery through increased resistance and flight. They also made a critical, if still poorly understood, contribution to the debate over race, slavery, and the future of African Americans in the nation. Contrabands’ actual status – legally, socially, and culturally – remained uncertain over the course of the war. Although the First

²¹⁷ More precisely, the First Confiscation Act of 1861 allowed the seizure of slaves being used directly to aid the rebellion. The Second Confiscation Act of 1862 expanded these terms to allow the confiscation of any slave owned by a Rebel, regardless of what labor they were engaged in, and declared all such persons free. The Militia Act, passed at the same time as the Second Confiscation Act, further stipulated that contrabands could be officially employed by the Union army and navy and granted freedom to any person so employed, as well as to their families. Berlin, *Slaves No More*, 20-41.

Confiscation Act was a critical shift in the government's war-time policy towards slavery, it had many limitations. The Act did not declare "contraband" to be free, or explicitly address their present or future status as property or persons. It continued to allow masters to reclaim runaways if they swore a loyalty oath to the federal government, or demonstrated that the slave was not directly employed in military labor. As constructed, the Act overwhelmingly applied to enslaved men, and effectively excluded women and children, because men were far more likely to be repurposed as military laborers and thus meet the requirement of being used directly to support the rebellion. But the First Confiscation Act was a watershed moment that was hard to control once it began.²¹⁸ The policy of accepting some but not all fugitives was even more problematic than the government's previous efforts at non-intervention. Faced with the arrival of thousands of slaves of all ages and both sexes, the increasing difficulty of determining the status of fugitive or abandoned slaves who did not meet the strict terms of the First Confiscation Act, and the Union Army's growing need for labor, Congress approved the Second Confiscation Act in July 1862. This Act went much further, allowing the confiscation of any slave owned by a Rebel master, regardless of whether their labor directly aided the war effort, and declaring all such persons "forever free of their servitude."²¹⁹ Of course, what this actually meant on the ground – in different

²¹⁸ Berlin, *Slaves No More*, 21-24; "The 'Contraband' Goods at Fortress Monroe," *Douglass' Monthly* (Rochester, New York), July 1861. For more about the complications of the Confiscation Acts' for enslaved women, see Thavolia Glymph, "'This Species of Property': Female Slave Contrabands in the Civil War," in Edward D. C. Campbell and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 55-71.

²¹⁹ Berlin, *Slaves No More*, 25-27, 31, 36-38, 40.

territories, at the discretion of different officers and soldiers, and in the rapidly changing circumstances of war – was not so easily defined.²²⁰

Many northerners viewed the contraband as a symbol of the dramatic changes taking place in the nation and as foretelling of what universal emancipation would mean for the country, whether they viewed that possibility as foreboding or hopeful. Northerners watched the contraband for answers to their questions about slaves' character, their potential and willingness to contribute as laborers and soldiers, their capacity to overcome the stigma and degradation of slavery, and their understanding and expectations of freedom. Questions about whether former slaves would be able to support themselves were at the heart of many debates over emancipation in the decades leading up to the war and during it. Critics of emancipation and the populace at large worried that the thousands of slaves who arrived at Union lines hungry and barely clothed would become permanently reliant on charity and government assistance. At the most basic level, of course people wondered whether African Americans, once freed, would prove to be industrious and thrifty, whether they would labor "without the threat of the lash." But dependency was about much more than labor – it was about whether those who had lived as slaves had the capacity to live as free people – not only to sustain their physical beings, but to live morally, to become "civilized," to educate themselves, to be informed citizens – to brush off the degradations of slavery. The ideologies

²²⁰ In very real terms, freedom itself was uncertain because people who ran away were sometimes caught and carried back; some were returned to their masters by the Union soldiers; some were kidnapped from contraband camps and Union-run plantations and returned to slavery. Even being a soldier was no guarantee of freedom because if the Confederates captured you, they treated all African American soldiers as slaves in rebellion, punishable by death for their part in the so-called insurrection.

behind racial slavery marked people of African descent as inherently inferior and servile. In this context, many northern whites wondered, what would it mean to emancipate a people who were supposedly innately suited for bondage?²²¹

The antebellum abolition movement helped to inform a wider (but, ultimately, still limited) public about the nature of slavery and the character of slaves, but it was the Civil War itself which made it impossible to ignore the issue of slavery's place in the nation's future and brought many white northerners, in and outside of the military, in direct contact with slaves for the first time. Arguments and evidence in support of abolition were as important as ever – perhaps even more so because now the possibility of millions gaining freedom was imminent. The pervasive references to “contraband” in the press, on the minstrel stage, in illustrations and political cartoons, and in popular culture suggest that “contraband” became the primary representation of slavery and slaves during the Civil War, much in the way that “Uncle Tom” did in the mania that followed Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel.²²² Historian Kate Masur argues that “Northern representations of contrabands reveal an intense conversation about not just the meanings of supposed racial difference but also the repercussions of enslavement, the prospects of black manhood, and the possibility of a body politic that included former slaves as full citizens.”²²³ The fact that that figure was represented in such diverse ways, by

²²¹ James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 134.

²²² On the ubiquity of the “Uncle Tom” image itself, see Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

²²³ Kate Masur, “‘A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation’: The Word ‘Contraband’ and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (March 2007), 1053.

such a variety of actors, makes this a particularly rich site for examining how understandings of race, slavery, and the war itself were being constructed by different actors even in the midst of this conflict.

While Masur and other scholars have primarily looked at how *others* imagined and gave meaning to the contraband, this chapter brings attention to how contraband men and women contributed to the national debate over race and slavery *themselves*. As the public grappled with the often conflicting representations of contraband available in popular culture, they were also exposed to the contrabands' own acts of self-representation. This would include the direct voices of the contraband in telling their personal stories and histories, but also what was reported *about* them – the observations which northerners made of contrabands' appearance, comportment, behavior, and participation in public events and celebrations, among other things. The Civil War opened the public stage to former and fugitive slaves on an unprecedented level. As northerners flooded the South during the war – as government and military officials, missionaries, teachers, and aid workers – thousands of contraband slaves had new opportunities to tell their own stories and potentially influence public opinion through their testimony and actions. Some of these new “representatives of the race” appeared in traditional venues, such as when the American Missionary Association “discovered” former slave William Davis in the contraband camp at Fortress Monroe and organized a public speaking tour for him throughout the northern and Border States.²²⁴

²²⁴ In the fall of 1861, AMA missionary Reverend L. C. Lockwood identified William Davis as one of a handful of influential religious leaders among the contraband at Fortress Monroe. Northerners immediately recognized Davis's potential and natural eloquence and recruited him to help raise

Speaking to packed houses in many different cities, William Davis touched on familiar antislavery themes: the brutal violence done to enslaved women; the anguish of parents separated from their children; and religious devotion as many slaves' only beacon of hope.²²⁵ Davis and other individuals like him played an important role as public speakers in the North, educating whites about the conditions of slavery before and during the war, seeking financial and other support for the contraband population, and advocating for total emancipation.²²⁶ Although these public figures were heralded as "representatives of the race" and certainly spoke to the capacity and potential of enslaved African Americans, on some level these individuals were much more *exceptional* than they were "typical." Listening to

money for the AMA's efforts with the contraband. In company with white representatives of the AMA, Davis made public appearances in many locations 1862-1863, including in the states of Massachusetts, New York, Maine, Ohio, Kentucky, and Vermont. One *American Missionary* article from the spring of 1862 identifies 15 different cities in Massachusetts where Davis had spoken during the last several weeks; see "William Davis—The Ex-Slave," *American Missionary* (New York), April 1862. For references to the "discovery" of William Davis at Fortress Monroe, see "Mission to the Freed Contrabands at Fortress Monroe, Va.: New Field of Usefulness," *Supplement to the American Missionary*, 1 October 1861; and "An Appeal for the Contrabands," *Douglass' Monthly*, November 1861. For references to Davis's speaking engagements in these locations, see "The Ex-Chattel's Lecture," *American Missionary*, June 1862; "Anniversary at Boston," *American Missionary*, July 1862; "Annual Meeting of the American Missionary Association" and "Special Notices," *American Missionary*, November 1862; "Home Missions. Ohio. From Rev. J. A. R. Rogers, Decatur, Brown Co., May 4, 1863," *American Missionary*, June 1863; "Annual Meeting of the American Missionary Association," *American Missionary*, December 1863; "Aid for the Contrabands," *Daily Cleveland Herald* (Cleveland, Ohio), 1 November 1862; "Local Matters," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 22, 1862; "Local Matters: Anniversary Meetings," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 29, 1862; "City and Vicinity," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* (Lowell, MA), March 3, 1862; "Local and Maine Items," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* (Bangor, ME), April 28, 1862; "American Missionary Association," *Vermont Chronicle* (Bellows Falls, VT), June 3, 1862.

²²⁵ See the following for references to some of the instances when Davis discussed these topics: "The Ex-Chattel's Lecture," *American Missionary*, June 1862; "Anniversary at Boston," *American Missionary*, July 1862; "Annual Meeting of the American Missionary Association," *American Missionary*, December 1863.

²²⁶ Although my own research has focused on William Davis's public role, newspapers identify at least one other contraband (William Thornton) who was singled out for a public speaking role in the North after being "discovered" at Fortress Monroe by AMA missionary Lockwood; there may very well have been others. For specific references to Thornton, see "Colored Refugees," *American Missionary*, February 1862; "Anniversary at Boston," *American Missionary*, July 1862; "Local Matters: Anniversary Meetings," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 29, 1862; "American Missionary Association," *Vermont Chronicle*, June 3, 1862.

Frederick Douglass, or William Davis, did not necessarily translate into a full understanding of the hopes and dreams of the millions of slaves who stood on the brink of freedom.

But with national attention focused on every move the contraband made, the Civil War also opened up new venues for self-expression to thousands of “ordinary” men and women who never stood behind a podium. Many of the northerners who went south during the war (most of them white) provided a keen audience for the contrabands they came in contact with. Like “a great cloud of witnesses,” they stood ready to record and report on what they saw and heard “in the land of Slavery.”²²⁷ In letters home to family, reports to freedmen’s aid societies, and war-time diaries and memoirs, these Northern witnesses disseminated contraband men and women’s voices and actions to a much larger public. Under constant scrutiny, contrabands’ individual and collective actions, as well as their spoken narratives, became public performances which spoke to how they understood their own changing status – from their persistent memories of the traumas they endured

²²⁷ Reporting to the *American Missionary* from Fortress Monroe in October 1861, missionary Reverend Lockwood wrote, “I think that these ‘contrabands’ have much to do, toward furthering their cause, in acting as well as praying. And hence I strive, and very successfully too, to point out to them the importance of their standing on their character, and presenting a conduct at once well-pleasing to God and approved of men. I tell them that they are surrounded with a great cloud of witnesses; that not only God and angels behold them, but thousands of people from all parts of the country are very observant and communicative.” See “Mission to the Freed Contrabands at Fortress Monroe, Va.,” *Supplement to the American Missionary*, 1 October 1861. In the October 1862 edition of the *American Missionary*, a notice appeared regarding the recent publication of Mrs. A. M. French’s memoir, *Slavery in South Carolina*, based on her work with the contraband there. The notice’s author especially recommended the book because it was written “by a Northern Christian woman, who has collected the fact on the spot—in the land of Slavery—from the lips of the victims, and surrounded by the scenes of their suffering.” First-person testimony regarding the slave experience was as highly valued in the context of the war as it had been in the antebellum abolition movement. See “New and Valuable Book,” *American Missionary*, October 1862; Austa Malinda French, *Slavery in South Carolina and the Ex-Slaves; or, The Port Royal Mission* (New York: Negro Universities Press, [1862] 1969).

under slavery, to their desire to display, exercise, and publicly perform their new freedoms and rights, contraband spoke to what it meant for these survivors of slavery to forge a new future and a new relationship to the nation as freedpeople and citizens. Through their personal testimony and various acts of self-representation, contraband men and women actively contributed to national debates over race, slavery, and emancipation, and offered a counterpoint to the often one-dimensional representations of the contraband which saturated popular culture and discourse at the time.²²⁸ Through the writings of northerners in the Civil War South, contrabands' performances and various acts of self-representation became part of an ongoing national debate about race, slavery, and emancipation.

Following a necessary discussion of the chapter's source material, this chapter is divided into four parts: The first part examines the testimony which contraband offered regarding their experiences in slavery and argues that contrabands' personal stories helped inform a larger public about the commonplace nature of family separation, degradation, and violence which slaves suffered at the

²²⁸ Other scholars have already done much to delineate the different ways that contraband were represented in popular culture and public discourse. Suffice it to say that popular depictions revealed a fundamental ambivalence about the contraband themselves and about emancipation. In many different forums, contraband were represented as comical, child-like, and relatively passive. The transformation from slavery to freedom was portrayed as incomplete and unthreatening by showing that contraband occupied many of the same roles and continued to have many of the same traits that they had as slaves; this reassured white northerners that emancipation did not mean revolution and would not require a fundamental reordering of society. In general, such representations often downplayed the role which contraband played in gaining their own freedom and gave little attention to their previous experience of slavery, except in some cases to emphasize their victimhood and dependency in order to gain sympathy and financial support. For a fuller discussion of these "outside" representations, see Masur, "A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation;" Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

hands of their masters and mistresses. In effect, these stories forced northerners to confront the reality of what they were allowing to continue if they did not commit to making emancipation part of the Union cause. The second part of the chapter continues this examination of contrabands' testimony, turning now to the significance of the stories they shared about their personal escapes from slavery and their willingness to sacrifice anything for freedom and for the Union cause.

Although Civil War studies typically talk about African American citizenship in terms of black men's military service, contrabands' stories of escape revealed the bravery, heroism, and endurance of contraband civilians who *also* demonstrated that they were willing to fight for freedom. The final two sections of the chapter turn to some of the ways that contraband *performed* their understandings of freedom by publicly displaying and demonstrating their changed status. In the first of these (the third section of the chapter), I examine how contraband women used choices about dress and adornment to mark their new status and claim individuality and respect for themselves and their children. In the fourth and final section, I turn to the multiple ways in which contraband publicly performed and declared their changed relationship to the nation, preemptively claiming and exercising some rights and privileges which remained legally uncertain. Through their stories, choices, and public actions, contraband men and women made a fundamental challenge to the Union's "hands off" policy and attitude towards slavery and challenged northerners to recognize and accept their changed status.²²⁹

²²⁹ This explanation may be tardy, but before proceeding to a specific analysis of the sources and contraband slaves' testimony and actions, I must clarify my use of the term "contraband." First, this study is not limited to men and women who fell under the legal definition of "contraband" delineated

Recovering Contraband Testimony and Performance in the Sources

An advertisement in the October 1862 edition of the *American Missionary* praised Mrs. A. M. French's new book, *Slavery in South Carolina*, for its moving and sympathetic portrait of the contraband men and women she worked with in the Sea Islands. The reviewer was particularly struck by the "narrations of the freed people, as described by Mrs. French"; the entire work bespoke an urgency and authenticity because its details were collected "in the land of Slavery—from the lips of the victims, and surrounded by the scenes of their suffering."²³⁰ Contrabands' personal stories, as well as evidence of the choices and actions which informed their acts of self-representation, have entered the historical record through the writings of people like French – primarily white northerners who went south during the war and reported on what they saw and heard. These men and women observed and interacted with contraband in various capacities, including as military and government officials; workers from freedmen's aid societies and other charitable organizations; teachers at freedmen's schools; and missionaries. The major sources

in the First and Second Confiscation Acts. As previously mentioned, "contraband" became the primary reference for and representation of slaves in the context of the war. The term was ubiquitous and northerners applied it to many, if not most, of the slaves they came in contact with, regardless of their actual status. The African American men and women who form the basis of this chapter fall under that broad category. Second, I frequently refer to these men and women *as* contraband, rather than some alternative, such as slaves or the enslaved, fugitives, runaways, refugees, or freedpeople. The term certainly has a tendency to objectify and dehumanize; it was, in fact, applied to these men and women at the time in order to include them within the category of seizable property. It is not my intention to dehumanize – this chapter works to show the ways that contraband defended and insisted on their own humanity. I rely on the term for two reasons. First, because it is a reminder that is the lens through which white northerners viewed them (both those who interacted with and observed the contraband directly, and those who read accounts of the contrabands' testimony and actions in the North). And second, because "contraband" better represents the quasi-free and undefined status that many of these men and women occupied during the war.

²³⁰ "New and Valuable Book," *American Missionary*, October 1862.

for this chapter were produced by such individuals and include private letters, diaries, and memoirs; official correspondence; the war-time reports published by freedmen's aid societies and various government entities; and the relatively under-utilized monthly newspapers published by freedmen's aid societies and other benevolent organizations like the American Missionary Association, which always included reports, letters, and observations from the field.

These sources reveal the multiple ways that contraband renegotiated their identities and their relationship to the nation in the midst of the Civil War. The same records that include the "narrations of the freedpeople" also contain evidence of the choices and actions of the contraband, which can be distilled from northerners' observations of them in the South. Contrabands' narratives, choices, and actions are all a critical part of this chapter's examination of contraband performance and self-representation, but the "narrations," in particular, require further discussion. Contraband spoke to northerners and others about what they experienced in slavery and shared the details of their escapes in a number of different contexts. Stories were told when contraband first arrived in camp or behind Union lines, when contraband received material aid or other kinds of assistance, during the visits which some northerners made to encampments and homes, in response to specific questions, as part of everyday conversation, and in group settings like community celebrations or religious services.

In his now classic essay, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," scholar John W. Blassingame evaluates two of the most significant sources of ex-slave testimony: the published antebellum slave narratives and the

WPA interviews of former slaves conducted in the 1930s. He makes only a passing reference to the kinds of primary sources which form the basis of this chapter (as a point of comparison), despite acknowledging that literally hundreds of interviews were “conducted by northern journalists, soldiers, missionaries, and teachers during and immediately after the Civil War.”²³¹ Neither Blassingame, nor anyone since, has evaluated that war-time testimony collectively, as a distinct body of narratives. This must be at least partly due to the fact that, unlike the antebellum slave narratives and the WPA interviews, the war-time testimony of contraband is scattered far and wide – it is not immediately apparent that a “body” of narratives exists and it takes a great deal of work to reconstruct one. Snippets of testimony appear in the newspapers and other publications put out by missionary groups and freedmen’s aid societies; in the personal correspondence and journals of many different individuals; in published and unpublished memoirs and reminiscences; and in official reports of various entities, among other places.²³²

In most cases, however, contrabands’ stories are not the detailed life stories contained in many of the book-length antebellum narratives. It seems more accurate to describe contrabands’ stories as a kind of oral testimony, as opposed to a more standardized or formalized “narrative.” In this sense, perhaps their stories

²³¹ John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (Nov. 1975), 486.

²³² Of course I must note that I make no claim whatsoever that I have made a comprehensive search for contraband testimony or that I have collected the full “body” of these narratives. No study is comprehensive and I have looked at a limited number of the total documents that might contain such narratives. I have, however, searched for and gathered testimony from a wide cross-section of available records and types of sources, including correspondence, memoirs, diaries, the newspapers and other publications of freedmen’s aid societies and other benevolent groups, and government and military reports on the contraband.

are more akin to those gathered together in Blassingame's edited volume *Slave Testimony*, or William Still's *Underground Railroad*.²³³ There was nothing standardized about the way contrabands' stories were recorded or transmitted to the public. Sometimes white writers reproduced an individual's story in the contrabands' first-person voice and went into sufficient detail that a life story seemed to emerge; at other times writers only shared a few sentences of what individual contraband said in response to some question or in relation to a particular topic; and at other times writers simply summarized a contraband's story for the reader in their own words. In all of these cases, the historian has no way to know for certain whether the writer accurately represented the words or details *as they were told* by the contraband, although some writers explicitly noted that they took down the words on the spot or always tried "to give their exact words."²³⁴

Despite the distinct nature of contrabands' testimony, it is still useful to evaluate those sources in the context of the other two major sources of slave testimony that Blassingame examines: published antebellum slave narratives and the WPA interviews of former slaves. Many of the same issues that have been of concern to scholars of these sources apply to the contrabands' stories as well: How

²³³ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*; William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author* (Philadelphia, Pa.: People's Pub. Co., 1879).

²³⁴ Quoted example in French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 207. For other examples of Northern writers mentioning their efforts to record stories accurately, see *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps*, ed. Henry L. Swint (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), 57; Vincent Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered by the Freed People to the United States Army in North Carolina: in the Spring of 1862 After the Battle of Newbern / by Vincent Colyer, Superintendent of the Poor Under General Burnside* (New York: Published by Vincent Colyer, No. 105 Bleecker Street, 1864), 16 [hereafter *Report of the Services Rendered*]; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 130-131.

authentic, accurate, or “truthful” is the testimony? How did white editors and/or writers shape or alter the final texts? And how representative of the general slave population are these particular slaves? These are important issues for the historian to consider when thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of relying on this kind of data.

It is telling that the 1862 review of French’s *Slavery in South Carolina* specifically praised the “narrations of the freed people, *as described by Mrs. French*” [author emphasis].²³⁵ Even when Northern writers wrote in the contraband’s first-person voice and tried “to give their exact words,” the narrations of the contraband only reach us through the intermediary of the white writer. The “white envelope,” as scholar John Sekora described it, is ever-present and represents the greatest challenge with relying on contrabands’ war-time testimony as a source.²³⁶ As already mentioned, Northern writers presented the testimony in many different forms and it is difficult to know for certain how that testimony may have been altered by the writer. Obviously, the stories are constructed and partial – contraband chose to speak about some things and not others; writers chose to include some details and not others, and also to not share certain stories at all. The nature of the sources makes it nearly impossible to corroborate any of the details from this distance, although a number of writers mentioned that *they* had corroborated the details of the story, had heard the same or similar stories from

²³⁵ “New and Valuable Book,” *American Missionary*, October 1862.

²³⁶ In his essay on the antebellum slave narratives, Sekora wrote about the challenges of separating the “black message” from the “white envelope,” as former slaves’ stories and voices were sometimes buried beneath the influence of the white abolition movement, expectations for a certain kind of story to be told within the slave narrative genre, and the influence of white editors and anamneses. See Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope.”

multiple people, or had it on authority that the contraband speaker was “reliable” and “regarded where he lives as in all respects competent to bear witness on the subject.”²³⁷ Although a relationship of power did exist between the contraband speaker and Northern writer, it was very different from the relationship of power between white WPA interviewers and impoverished former slaves living in the Jim Crow South of the 1930s. Contraband usually viewed the northerners who came south during the war as sympathetic and “on their side,” and had little reason to hide the truth.²³⁸ It seems reasonable that contrabands’ war-time testimony should be treated with the same basic premise of belief that we do the published slave narratives, which also sometimes had details that could not be corroborated, included scenes of dialogue that were obviously not verbatim, and blended the

²³⁷ Corroboration is difficult for many reasons. The contraband who offered testimony are not identified by the writer in a way that makes them easy to trace: Writers often only referred to the contraband speaker by first name, and sometimes mentioned no name at all. The name of their former master and specific location of their last residence is rarely given. Even the white writers remain anonymous at times because if, for example, one of the freedmen’s aid newspapers published a letter from a teacher working in the South, the paper might not identify that person by their full name and usually gave no indication of where they were from. For examples of Northern writers who mentioned the reliability of the contraband speaker and/or their own efforts to corroborate a story, see Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 191; French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 56-57; J. Miller McKim, *The Freedmen of South Carolina : Address Delivered by J. Miller M’Kim in Sansom Hall, July 9th, 1862, Together with a Letter from the Same to Stephen Colwell, Esq., Chairman of the Port Royal Relief Committee* (Philadelphia: W.P. Hazard, 1862), 19. The quotes of specific language above are from French and McKim, respectively.

²³⁸ Blassingame argues that the most important question in evaluating the WPA interviews of former slaves is “whether the interview situation was conducive to the accurate communication and recording of what the informants remembered of slavery.” There were several impediments to this, including the hostile racial climate of the time; African Americans’ view that the white interviewers lacked empathy for them and were in a position of power over them; and white interviewers’ practice of asking leading questions and sometimes refusing to accept “wrong” answers. Blassingame argues that this was not a situation conducive to truth-telling and interview subjects frequently edited their responses and sometimes felt pressured to give the “right” responses. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 481-484. For further discussion of the ways that race shaped the WPA interviews of former slaves, see Sharon Ann Musher, “Contesting ‘The Way the Almighty Wants It’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (March 2001), 1-31; Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

editor's commentary with the slave's voice without clearly distinguishing between the two.²³⁹

When evaluating the accuracy and authenticity of contraband testimony, one of the most obvious challenges is that many Northern writers (white and black) used so-called "Negro dialect" when writing in a contraband's first-person voice. Although this was not a standardized editorial practice, as in the case of the WPA interviews, it is difficult if not impossible to know when writers were imposing and/or exaggerating dialect in the contraband's speech and when they were using dialect in an attempt to accurately represent a contraband's specific language and diction.²⁴⁰ Beyond issues of accuracy, whites' use of such dialect may also raise questions about how much agency contraband had in constructing their self-

²³⁹ I take to heart Stanley M. Elkins' suggestion (as quoted in Blassingame) "that eyewitness accounts of slavery 'were both hostile and sympathetic in nature. It is perhaps best that each be given equal weight, as evidence in the judicial sense must always be, and the best presumption probably is that none of these observers was lying about the facts as he saw them. Different facts impressed different people, of course. ... Much is gained and not much lost on the provisional operating principle that they were all telling the truth.'" Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 3; quoted in Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 473.

²⁴⁰ Although most of the Northern writers this chapter draws evidence from were white, obviously African Americans also went south to aid the freedpeople during the war and wrote about those experiences. Both Harriet Jacobs and Charlotte Forten sometimes used dialect in representing contrabands' speech. The fact that African Americans from the North also sometimes used dialect in their writing complicates our understanding of what the use of so-called "Negro dialect" actually signified in these situations. Other evidence suggests that writers did not always intend to use dialect as a marker of race or inferiority, and did not indiscriminately apply it to every African American they wrote about. White Northern writers Sarah and Lucy Chase sometimes employed dialect, but not always. There are also examples in their writing of when they were clearly trying to present words phonetically in order to give a sense of how a speaker might draw out a particular word as he spoke. One also wonders if they were sometimes simply using dialect to show "local color;" one of the sisters noted that "The [southern] whites rival the negroes in talking of what happens 'Heeugh.'" For examples of Jacobs' and Forten's use of dialect, see Harriet Jacobs to William Lloyd Garrison, August 1862, in *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 399-406 [hereafter *HJFP*]; Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands, Part I," *Atlantic Monthly* 13, no. 79 (May 1864), 588. For examples of some of the different ways the Chase sisters used some variation of dialect, see *Dear Ones at Home*, 21-23, 38, 61. For more information about dialect in the WPA interviews, see Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 485; Musher, "Contesting 'The Way the Almighty Wants It,'" 18-20.

representations for the public. Does the performance still belong to the contraband if his or her story is puppeted by another hand, in another voice? Writing in dialect is always a choice and in the nineteenth century it was often meant to suggest something derogatory about the intelligence and sophistication of the speaker. This inference would not have been lost on nineteenth-century readers, but that does not necessarily mean that the *message* of that dialect-rendered testimony was lost.²⁴¹ Words matter deeply, but in some ways the *way* that contraband told their stories (or whites related them) mattered less than *what* they talked about. Dialect did not diminish the pathos of a mother remembering her child's death. It was and is the stories that contraband told – the personal *experiences* they chose to reveal – that matter most. As the reader will see in the first section of the chapter, it was those *experiences*, not the specific language they were described in, that attested to contrabands' shared humanity and offered evidence of the widespread and everyday nature of slavery's worst abuses.

One of the greatest strengths of the contraband testimony is the degree to which the speakers of these narratives may be seen as “representative” of the general slave population. The authors of antebellum slave narratives were asked to be “representatives of the race,” but in many ways they were not a fair approximation of the millions who stood to be emancipated over the course of the

²⁴¹ Nineteenth-century Americans would have been familiar with the use of so-called “Negro dialect” in representations of African Americans and slaves in a variety of contexts, including on the minstrel stage and in the novel and staged versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Literature scholar Lisa Cohen Minnick provides a useful overview of the history of dialect use in literature, as well an examination of the ways that different authors could use dialect for different purposes. See Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

Civil War. As Blassingame notes, a disproportionate number of these antebellum authors experienced slavery in the Upper South; *very few* women published narratives; most slaves were not successful in their escape attempts, let alone in coming to the attention of Northern abolitionists and becoming part of the antislavery campaign; and many of these authors were gifted and exceptional individuals. Some scholars have argued that the WPA interviews are more “representative” than the published narratives, but the sample of former slaves represented in the WPA interviews also has some limitations. In his examination of the body of WPA interviews of former slaves, Blassingame notes that former slaves from the Upper South are actually underrepresented; most of the interview subjects were living in the same locale where they had lived as slaves; and the former slaves who were still alive to be interviewed in the 1930s had lived much longer than the average life expectancy for slaves in 1850, possibly due to better treatment. The age of the WPA interviewees also had a significant impact on their testimony. Most of them had been children at the time of emancipation and thus could only speak about how they experienced slavery *as children*. Furthermore, at least 65 years had passed since their experience; some memories had faded and some perspectives changed. The strongest argument the WPA interviews could make for being more “representative” is that they included a much larger proportion of women.²⁴²

²⁴² With regard to the significance of most interview subjects living in the same locales where they had lived as slaves, Blassingame writes, “Taken at face value, there seems to have been a bias in many states toward the inclusion of the most obsequious former slaves. This is especially true when most of the informants had spent all of their lives in the same locale as their former master’s plantation. Since the least satisfied and most adventuresome of the former slaves might have migrated to northern states or cities after the Civil War, the WPA informants may have been atypical of antebellum slaves.” See Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 480, 486-487.

In comparison to the almost entirely male and often exceptional authors of the antebellum slave narratives, the contrabands who spoke to Northerners about their experience of slavery are more representative of the slave population as a whole. As stated previously, the Civil War created opportunities for many more enslaved men and women to tell their stories and reach a wider public. Successful slave flight increased dramatically in the context of war and the contraband population included men and women who had experienced slavery under a diverse set of circumstances. Women, children, and whole families ran in greater numbers than ever before and some of them found an audience for their personal testimony when they crossed into Union lines. The fact that women and children were often the majority population in contraband camps, and that so many of the white northerners who went south to work in freedmen's aid and education were women, actually means that enslaved women's testimony dominates the record at times. We learn much more about women's experience of slavery, war-time sacrifices, and resolute courage in enacting their escapes in these war-time narratives than we have access to in other sources.²⁴³

From the perspective of distance from events, the war-time testimony of contraband has an advantage over both the antebellum narratives and the WPA interviews.²⁴⁴ Antebellum slave narratives were written months or years after an

²⁴³ I took note of the contraband testimony which appeared in a broad range of sources, many of them authored by white northerners who recorded what they saw and heard. In some cases, these writers described the kind of testimony they heard, in general, in their interactions with the contraband; in most cases, the writers identified and/or attributed particular testimony to individual men and women they spoke with. I recorded 94 unique examples of the latter (where the testimony is attributed to an individual); 60 of those pieces of testimony came from contraband women and 34 from contraband men.

²⁴⁴ Blassingame acknowledges as much. See Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 486.

individual's escape from slavery; the subjects of the WPA interviews were trying to recall what they felt and experienced more than six decades earlier. The stories that contraband told were shared in the immediate aftermath of their escapes, in the midst of war and the uncertain territory between slavery and freedom that these fugitives occupied. Contraband were much closer to the experience and memory of slavery than the other narrators and interview subjects. And they spoke about their memories of slavery and hopes for freedom in the very moments when they were actively trying to renegotiate their status, identities, and rights. Neither the WPA interviews, nor the post-bellum narratives published by former slaves, offer such an immediate insight into how enslaved African Americans understood slavery and freedom in the midst of the Civil War and their individual negotiations of freedom. Like the published slave narratives and the WPA interviews of former slaves, these spoken narratives of the Civil War must be approached with a concern for the circumstances surrounding their construction, reproduction, and dissemination. But they have much to offer the scholar who is willing to navigate those issues.

Because this chapter is not simply using these sources to “understand slavery,” but to understand how contraband were making sense of their lives in slavery *at this particular moment*, It seems appropriate to also say a word about the potential impact of these narratives on contemporaries. This chapter argues that contrabands' words and actions “in the trenches” of the South contributed to a larger, national debate about race, slavery, and emancipation. Their testimony, choices, and public actions all constituted a kind of performance in which the contraband constructed their own representations of slavery, gave meaning to their

successful escapes, and offered myriad public demonstrations of how they understood freedom and what they hoped it would mean. The audience for these performances included the transplanted northerners (and others) who directly observed and interacted with the contraband, as well as the thousands of people back home who read about them. Stories from “the front” were widely distributed and had the potential to reach and influence a large audience.²⁴⁵

Some of the northerners who worked with the contraband during the Civil War were profoundly moved and changed by the experience and hoped that the

²⁴⁵ For example, the *Freedmen's Advocate* reported that it was “in demand for distribution” in the country, in the army, in hospitals, “and in a hundred other places where the truth should be sent.” The editor informed his readers that the paper had published and circulated over 31,500 copies in the last four months, as well as “circulars and appeals of over 10,000 copies.” The monthly *Freedmen's Bulletin* boasted that it had 5,000 regular subscribers, “reaching every township in the Northwest.” The publications of freedmen's aid societies were even in demand abroad by those interested in the freedman's cause. See “How the *Freedmen's Advocate* can be Distributed with Profit to the Cause,” *Freedmen's Advocate* (New York) 1, no. 4 (April 1864); “Report of the Executive Committee of the N. F. R. A. for the Month of May, 1864,” *Freedmen's Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864), 1; *The Freedmen's Bulletin* (Chicago) 1, no. 4 (Jan. 1865); “Letter from Manchester, England, February 4, 1865,” *The National Freedman, a Monthly Journal of the National Freedmen's Relief Association* (New York) 1, no. 2 (March 1, 1865), [hereafter *National Freedman*]; “Our Friends in Scotland,” *Freedmen's Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864). The mainstream press also published first-hand accounts of the contraband, including extensive reprints from the *American Missionary*, various freedmen's aid papers, and other reform-minded publications. For example, the letters which Lockwood wrote back to the AMA and which were originally published in the *American Missionary* were also reprinted elsewhere, thus expanding their audience and potential influence; the same was true for letters which Sarah and Lucy Chase wrote home for the benefit of the freedmen's aid society. The AMA reported that the proceedings of its 1863 annual meeting (including a public address by contraband William Davis) were widely reported in the mainstream press, citing the proceedings' appearance in nine different newspapers in major cities like Boston and New York. Mainstream papers also published “original” first-hand accounts of the contraband. For example, one of Charlotte Forten's letters was published in the *Boston Evening Transcript*; the *Hartford Press* published a letter which a Union officer sent home, describing the narrative a freedwoman told him about her life in slavery; and the *New York Evening Post* published an extensive article following a visit to the contraband camps around D.C., in Harriet Jacob's company. As was more generally true in the nineteenth century, these publications not only reached their individual subscribers, but were passed around within families, groups, and communities, thus reaching an even greater number of individuals. See “The Virginia Freedmen; Their Moral and Intellectual Improvement,” *American Missionary*, November 1861; *Dear Ones at Home*, 31; Child to Anna Loring, December 7, 1862, [from Wayland, Mass.], in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 424-426; “Freedmen—Their Conduct,” *American Missionary*, May 1862; Ulysses B. Ward to the Editor of the *New York Evening Post*, Washington, [D.C.], April 29, 1863, in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 480-481; “The Late Annual Meeting” and “Annual Meeting of the American Missionary Association,” *American Missionary*, December 1863.

Northern public would be too, as they read about contrabands' experiences in slavery and their efforts to claim freedom.²⁴⁶ Several Union men and women who worked with the freedpeople wrote about coming to understand the cruelty and violence of slavery on a new level. What they had learned from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the abolition movement did not compare to the thing itself, now that they had seen and listened to so many men and women just free from slavery's grasp.²⁴⁷

Writing to the *Freedmen's Advocate* in 1864, freedmen's teacher Minnie Hall spoke eloquently about what the contraband had taught her:

I have *seen* and *felt* more of human suffering and degradation since I have been in Norfolk, than I ever *saw* or *felt*, or even dreamed of in all my life before ; and yet, what I have seen is but as a drop in the bucket when compared with what others have seen. ... I have visited forty families since I

²⁴⁶ There is evidence that some members of the larger Northern public were similarly moved and influenced by what they read. Readers of freedmen's aid papers and other publications sometimes wrote to the editor about the impact which contrabands' stories were having on them as individuals and on their communities, bringing people more in sympathy with the idea of emancipation. Enclosing \$5 for the benefit of the contraband, one woman wrote of how her "sympathies have been greatly moved by reading of the poor 'contrabands.'" See "Extracts of Letters to the Treasurer," *American Missionary*, July 1862. In a note which accompanied the donation of \$60 worth of shoes for the contraband, the writer observed that "Prejudice is fast changing to sympathy and good will for the ex-slaves." See "Letters to the Treasurer," *American Missionary*, March 1864. *The American Missionary* received a number of such testimonials, including a letter in March 1864 in which one woman noted that as a result of the magazine's reports on the contraband, "sympathy for the suffering victims of oppression has been awakened in many hearts that never manifested nor felt sympathy in that direction before." Even a reader from the border state of Maryland, where slavery persisted until November 1864, wrote of the "great change of sentiment" which was "rapidly taking place [t]here." "Letter from a Widow" and "Letters to the Treasurer," *American Missionary*, March 1864.

²⁴⁷ One freedmen's aid worker, M. Jennie Armstrong, wrote that "the cruelties of slavery are proving every day to have been more merciless than many of us believed, in spite of all we had heard and read." See "From Our Teachers' Home, at Norfolk, Va.," *Freedmen's Advocate* 2, no. 1 (January 1865). Benjamin Butler, in speaking about how his views of slavery changed over the course of the war, said that "He had, on reading Mrs. Stowe's book--*Uncle Tom's Cabin*--believed it to be an overdrawn, highly-wrought picture of Southern life, but he had seen with his own eyes, and heard with his own ears, many things, which go beyond her book as much as her book goes beyond an ordinary school-girl's novel." "General Butler," *American Missionary*, February 1863. Even veteran abolitionists like Thomas Wentworth Higginson acknowledged that the contraband understood "the whole problem of Slavery" and possessed a knowledge of the current social, political, and military crisis which rivaled that of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. "[T]he wisest philosophy could teach them nothing as to that ... personal experience is the best logician." Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 48, 191-193. For another example, see Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1893 [c1892]), 88.

came here, I have talked with them of the past, present, and of the future ; and as I have listened to the story of their wrongs in the past, to their expressions of content and gratitude for present favors, and of their hope in the great and glorious future that opens up before their children, my heart has been deeply, strongly moved, and I could but wish that some of my good friends at the North could see and hear for themselves ...”²⁴⁸

When writers like Hall reported on what they saw and heard among the contraband, many in the North became vicarious witnesses to contrabands’ war-time performances and acts of self-representation. Rather than waiting on the sidelines as the passive subjects of sympathy and speculation, contraband men and women actively contributed to the national debate about race, slavery, and emancipation when they asserted the authority of their individual experiences and preemptively exercised the new rights and freedoms they hoped to secure.

***“No more whipping; no more hand-cuffing; ... no more selling to Georgia”:
Contraband Testify to the Everyday Violence of Slavery***

The idea that enslaved men and women’s humanity was somehow in question seems ridiculous to us today, but there were very real debates about this in the nineteenth century. Efforts to demonstrate slaves’ humanity and capacity were part of the antebellum abolition movement and during the war it became even more important to convince the Northern public that slaves were not entirely degraded by slavery. Proslavery rhetoric often depicted slavery as a civilizing, benevolent, paternalistic institution which provided religion, discipline, and custodial care to enslaved African Americans who were barbarous by nature and unable to take care

²⁴⁸ “The Teacher’s Home,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 1, no. 12 (December 1864).

of themselves. The Civil War itself tended to dehumanize the contraband because as the Union Army pushed further into southern territory and encountered more and more slaves, Northerners struggled to see those men and women as anything but anonymous “hordes.” Reflecting on her work among the contraband in 1862, Mrs. French believed that Northern sympathies could only be awakened if they were made to “see slavery not in confused masses, odious from being so colossal, but in individuals, in facts-- ...”²⁴⁹ Contrabands’ personal stories and acts of self-representation returned focus to the individual and helped northerners understand that those “masses” were men, women, and children who risked everything to bring themselves to freedom. They also testified to enslaved people’s deep humanity in the face of a brutal institution which exercised control over most aspects of their lives.

Several freedmen’s aid workers described slavery as a “sealed book” – on some level, unknowable – but every story the contraband told was like a blade slicing open newly printed pages. Contraband spoke to Northern whites about things that they had never dared to speak about outside the slave community. One of the striking features of the writings of aid workers like Elizabeth Hyde Botume or Austa Melinda French, and confirmed in narratives elsewhere, is what we learn about the way masters, overseers, and the slave society itself demanded that enslaved men and women perform the role or identity imposed upon them. Slaves were expected to perform servility and contentment for outsiders who visited the plantation, but also behind closed doors for their owners. The institution of slavery

²⁴⁹ French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, x, 65.

demanded submission, compliance, and deference; it not only required slaves to accept and submit to deplorable conditions, but sometimes to give their tacit approval to the debased acts of their masters and mistresses.²⁵⁰ French and other freedmen's aid workers recorded multiple examples in which contraband spoke about being expected to perform loyalty and submission for their masters: one man described in detail the ritualized beatings his master gave out every Monday morning before the slaves resumed their work and his expectation that each one literally thank him for the whipping before the next victim came forward.²⁵¹ Proslavery writers, and even some abolitionists, took these performances and silences at face value, assuming that enslaved African Americans were so brutalized – whether by nature, or by the institution of slavery – that they did not share the same human feelings as whites. Under this belief, whites could argue that slaves did not have real feelings for or attachment to their spouses or children; that enslaved women were sexually promiscuous and immoral; and that slaves valued the bargain they struck with their masters, trading labor and loyalty for their sustenance and uplift. All of this, of course, was a way of defending slave owners' actions by arguing that slaves were not particularly upset with being separated from family members, having sex with overseers and masters, or laboring for someone else's benefit.

²⁵⁰ Sharon Block also found evidence to suggest the ways that masters tried to *compel consent* from slaves and indentured servants; in this case, in order to gain some implicit sanction for their sexual exploitation of unfree women. See Block, "Lines of Color, Sex and Service: Comparative Sexual Coercion in Early America."

²⁵¹ For this specific example, see French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 67-69. For other examples of contraband speaking about having to hide their true feelings and feign acceptance for their masters, see: French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 56-57, 59, 60-63, 108-109, 120-121, 191; "Mission to the Freed Contrabands at Fortress Monroe, Va.," *Supplement to the American Missionary*, 1 October 1861; "South Carolina," *American Missionary*, June 1862.

When contraband spoke about their experiences in slavery, they shattered such arguments.

Contrabands' testimony regarding the slave experience focused on the separation and loss of family members; the physical, sexual, and emotional violence they endured at the hands of their oppressors; coerced labor; the experience of being viewed and treated like property; and the fundamental lack of loyalty, compassion, or paternal feeling among their owners despite years of devoted service. This section will primarily focus on contrabands' testimony regarding family separation and violence, which were predominant themes in the stories of both men and women as they reflected on their lives in slavery. The profound grief which many contraband expressed about what they suffered in slavery underscored the reality that enslaved men and women shared the same familial feelings, attachments, and fears that whites did. Their testimony showed that the kinds of neglect, exploitation, and abuse which fugitive activists wrote and spoke about before the war were not exceptions to the rule, but inherent to the system of human bondage being practiced in the southern states.

Contrabands' testimony revealed that the loss and/or separation of family was an almost universal experience among the enslaved population. Most often relatives were lost when someone was sold away, but contraband also spoke about high rates of infant mortality and family members they were forced to leave behind when they made their escape to Union lines.²⁵² The loss of parents, spouses,

²⁵² Examples of family separation through sale and high rates of infant mortality are explored in the pages that follow. For examples of contraband who spoke about being separated from family in the process of their wartime escape from slavery, see: New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society

children, and grandchildren was a reminder of the arbitrary power which slave owners exercised over slaves' lives. Both men and women spoke about being devastated by the loss of their children and the fact that some parents actually grieved themselves to the point of illness and death.²⁵³ As much as white abolitionists spoke about imagining one's self in the slave's place in order to "realize something of their condition," professional contraband William Davis insisted that no one could truly understand or empathize with the experience of losing one's children to the slave market unless "they had been once in their condition."²⁵⁴ In doing so, he reminded the public that sympathy and suffering were not the same thing and also asserted that African American pain did not have to be re-imagined as white pain in order to have meaning.

Contrabands' war-time testimony revealed the tremendous heartbreak of individual losses, but also the staggering number of slaves who had endured this trauma repeatedly. Reporting on her visits among the contraband at Port Royal,

of Friends, *Report of a Committee of Representatives of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends upon the Condition and Wants of Colored Refugees* ([New York: s.n., 1862]), 14 [hereafter *Report of a Committee of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1862)]; Lois Bryan Adams, *Letter from Washington, 1863-1865*, ed. Evelyn Leasher (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1999), 253; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 48-49, 192; Colyer, *Report of Services Rendered*, 19-22; "Extracts from Teachers' Letters," *Freedmen's Record* (Boston) 1, no. 7 (July 1865), 116; "More Sample Bricks," *Freedmen's Bulletin* (Chicago) 1, no. 4 (January 1865).

²⁵³ French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 258-259; "The Ex-Chattel's Lecture," *American Missionary*, June 1862; Edward L. Pierce, "The Contrabands at Fortress Monroe," *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1861), 636-637.

²⁵⁴ Davis spoke about this at the AMA's annual meeting in 1862. Prior to his own address, the white AMA Secretary spoke to members about the importance of "fully remembering those in bonds, as bound with them" in order to "realize something of their condition." White abolitionists frequently asked members of the public to imagine themselves in the slave's place – and especially the place of the slave parent losing their child. When Davis subsequently told the meeting that it was impossible for them to truly understand this experience unless they had personally endured it, he was responding to and correcting the Secretary's earlier suggestion. He claimed the authority of individual experience and he also insisted that African American pain did not need to be reimagined as white pain in order for it to have meaning. "Annual Meeting of the American Missionary Association," *American Missionary*, November 1862.

French wrote that “One-third of the poor ex-slave women have lost one-half of their children, two-thirds have lost one-third, and so on. Many have lost all.”²⁵⁵ In their conversations with aid workers, contraband women spoke to the extent of their losses: six children sold away; fourteen children either dead or gone; three generations of children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren devoured by the slave market.²⁵⁶ Far from becoming inured to this habitual devastation, contraband continued to mourn these separations and losses years after the events. Mothers and fathers recalled, in detail, the specific scenes in which their children were taken from them; imagined the pining of those they left behind; and constantly worried for the children they never saw again.²⁵⁷ One woman despaired, telling Botume, “... I cannot sleep nights ... Every time I shut my eyes I hear my baby cry, ‘ Take me wid you, mammy ; take me wid you ! ’”²⁵⁸

These individual stories of loss spoke to contrabands’ humanity, but also revealed the incredible Inhumanity of their white owners, who broke apart families despite slaves’ desperate pleas (and lifetime service) and often showed a complete disregard for the basic needs of mothers and their children. In their conversations with female aid workers, contraband women spoke about a high infant mortality rate and the physical toll that overwork, inadequate food, and lack of care caused

²⁵⁵ French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 256.

²⁵⁶ “Freedmen. Virginia. From Miss Harriet Taylor. Portsmouth, Va., March 30, 1863,” *American Missionary*, May 1863; *Dear Ones at Home*, 132; “Freedmen—Their Conduct,” *American Missionary*, May 1862.

²⁵⁷ For relevant examples of contraband men and women speaking on these topics, see the following: *Dear Ones at Home*, 55, 128, 132; Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 58-59, 163-164; “Freedmen—Their Conduct,” *American Missionary*, May 1862; “Freedmen. Virginia. From Miss Harriet Taylor. Portsmouth, Va., March 30, 1863,” *American Missionary*, May 1863.

²⁵⁸ Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 164. A contraband man also spoke about how his children must be crying for him. See Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 19-20.

mothers and children during and after a pregnancy. Multiple women told French that their infants “fretted” themselves to death because they were forced to leave them unattended while they worked.²⁵⁹ As one woman explained, “... ‘had to leab bab ‘e in house all day while gone to work. ... ‘Hang it up dere in de basket, an’ boil some flou’ for it. It cry all day, an’ I cry all day,’ said the mother, her eyes filling, ... ‘an’ he die, ‘cause he cry so.” Another contraband woman who lost three children in infancy painfully recalled, “... ‘Massah make we go in fiel’ an’ work when baby dead in house. O ! Massah hate us so.”²⁶⁰ These stories further undermined the notion of paternalism and the idea that slaves were part of a master’s extended “plantation family.”²⁶¹ Reproducing this testimony in her war-time memoir, French challenged her readers: “Now can a woman, a mother, read this, and not weep, with that poor mother, and not vow eternal vengeance upon slavery?”²⁶²

Contraband men and women also spoke about the loss of wives and husbands, underscoring again their intense affection for and attachment to family members.²⁶³ Even well-meaning missionaries and aid workers sometimes put little stock in “slave marriages.” They assumed that the relative informality of these unions, the likelihood and frequency of separations, and the frequency of re-marriage among slaves meant that enslaved men and women also viewed these

²⁵⁹ An example of a woman who talks about not being allowed time to care for her child during the workday: “Traces of the Institution,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864).

²⁶⁰ French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 256-259.

²⁶¹ For an example of a contraband speaking about the cruelty of masters and mistresses who sold family members away despite years of devoted service, see: “Freedmen. Virginia. From Miss Harriet Taylor. Portsmouth, Va., March 30, 1863,” *American Missionary*, May 1863.

²⁶² French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 256.

²⁶³ These are examples of contraband talking about the loss of spouses through sale: “Extracts of Letters from Teachers, [Norfolk, Va. November, 1864],” *Freedmen’s Journal* (Boston) 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1865), 4-5.

relationships as more casual and impermanent and, thus, that they were less emotionally invested in them. However, contraband testimony revealed the powerful connection which many spouses shared and the lasting sorrow of separations. The ability to sell a man away from his wife, or vice versa – and the ease with which it could be accomplished – was another example of the terrible power slavery and slave owners exercised over these men and women’s lives.

Writing to the *Freedmen’s Advocate* from Vicksburg, Mississippi, aid worker Martha C. Hart reported that the people she visited spoke of these separations as being like a death; the immediate loss rendering such a blow that they felt they would die and certainly that they would never marry again. As one woman explained, after her husband was sold, “... ‘I just left my heart behind I knowed ; I grieved, and grieved, until grievin’ was no service, and den jist begged de good Lord not to suffer me to grieve any more.’”²⁶⁴

Contraband also spoke about the violence and disdain they endured at the hands of their masters and mistresses. More than simply eliciting sympathy, testimony regarding violence offered evidence that such treatment was not the exception but the rule, that slavery actually required the use and threat of violence in order to be maintained, and that both white men and white women used violence in order to establish, assert, and display their authority and control over their human property.²⁶⁵ I previously mentioned the example of a master who used ritual

²⁶⁴ “From Our Teachers’ Home, at Norfolk, Va.,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 2, no. 1 (January 1865).

²⁶⁵ These are examples in which contraband spoke about being beaten by their mistresses, specifically: “Extracts from Teachers’ Letters: Hilton Head, S. C., March 7, 1865,” *Freedmen’s Record* 1, no. 4 (April 1865), 63; “Emancipated Slaves, Brought from New Orleans, by Col. George Hanks,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1864).

violence to compel slaves' labor and submission by whipping his entire slave workforce every Monday morning.²⁶⁶ This was violence without provocation or reason, difficult to justify on any terms. But slaves endured and witnessed violence in many different contexts. It was used to coerce labor and sex; to discipline and punish; to proscribe certain behaviors; but most of all, perhaps, to manifest the slave owner's power and the slave's powerlessness (if only in that moment). Slaves were reminded of their ultimate lack of power when they were obliged to watch family members viciously beaten and could not intervene; when they were faced with the "choice" of submitting to sexual assault or being whipped and worked harder; and when white men and women punished them for taking independent actions like seeking religion or trying to care for one's infant during the workday.²⁶⁷

Contraband spoke about violence as a fundamental part of their experience as slaves, and as one of their reasons for pursuing freedom.

What contraband spoke about may not have been entirely new information to some, but for a northern population whose primary reference for slavery was often *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, contrabands' testimony showed that the book's claims were not outrageous and that there were far more Mr. (and Mrs.) Simon Legrees than Harrises or St. Clares. When a desperate Eliza and Harry sought refuge at the doorstep of Senator and Mrs. Bird, their presence demanded a response; the same was true when contraband men, women, and children seized freedom for

²⁶⁶ French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 67-69.

²⁶⁷ For some examples of contraband who spoke about seeing their family members beaten or killed, see: Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 83; *Report of a Committee of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1862), 14; French, *Slavery in South Carolina*, 108-109.

themselves and arrived at Union camps. The individual stories they told about their slave experience presented a challenge to northerners who saw slavery as a “southern problem” and wanted to restore the Union without interfering with the peculiar institution. Simply stopping slavery’s expansion would not put an end to the domestic slave trade which tore families apart; or stop the myriad evils that came with unchecked power over human property. These evils became less abstract with every story contraband men and women told, every bit of testimony that was relayed to Northerners from the frontlines. Even veteran abolitionists spoke about now understanding something about slavery and human suffering that they never had before. Far from sensational exaggerations, these were the everyday atrocities of slavery.

The way contraband spoke about and remembered slavery at this critical juncture is also important because it tells us something about what they imagined and hoped freedom would mean. After a public reading of the newly passed Emancipation Proclamation, contraband George Payne rejoiced with others gathered there and gave thanks, as he exclaimed, “... ‘No more whipping ; no more hand-cuffing ; no more dog-hauling ; no more selling to Georgia ; no more selling wives ; no more getting shut of our child, for we are free!’” Some whites worried that former slaves understood freedom in naïve and child-like terms – as an end to all labor, responsibility, and deference to (white) authority, and as an immediate and total transformation of their status. In reality, many contraband expressed

sentiments similar to George Payne – they defined freedom primarily as an end to the traumas they experienced under slavery.²⁶⁸

“[This War] is to teach us, regardless of sex and complexion, hard lessons of sacrifice, of courage, and of fortitude.” Fighting for Freedom outside the Army

The Civil War raised fundamental questions about African Americans’ belonging in the nation, but it also created a new context and opportunity for slaves and former slaves to stake a claim to their rightful place within it. Before and during the war, William Nell and other black intellectuals made historical arguments regarding African Americans’ investment in and claim to the nation: African Americans had contributed to the nation since its founding, were central to its development and wealth, and had taken up arms in its defense since the American Revolution. But the war itself allowed contraband and other African Americans to make a more immediate claim by drawing attention to the patriotism, loyalty, and devotion they felt to the nation *at that moment*, rather than calling up images of previous generations’ contributions and sacrifices. Taking up arms was one way for African Americans to simultaneously express their loyalty *to* and stake their rightful claim *in* the nation; and certainly that is the action which has received the most attention from historians. But citizenship was also enacted *outside* the confines of the military. African American men, women, and children – soldiers *and* civilians – claimed, asserted, and performed their new status as free people and worthy

²⁶⁸ William Beverly, another fugitive, is quoted as using similar expressions and language in the same document: “The Proclamation Among the Contrabands,” *American Missionary*, February 1863. Also see “Beaufort, North Carolina, April 8, 1864,” *Freedom’s Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864).

citizens when they demonstrated their devotion and loyalty to the nation and their willingness to risk everything for freedom.

Contrabands and other African Americans were in the process of renegotiating their relationship to the nation during the Civil War. Some whites liked to characterize the former slave population as a burden – the cause of the war – idle after their “rescue” by the Union Army. Even when they were blamed for the conflict, the contraband were often viewed as on the sidelines – somehow separate from the abstract principles of “Union” and “liberty” which the North was fighting for, not part of the fight against secession and treason, not making the same incredible sacrifices that Union men and women were on the front lines and the home front. Just as some whites questioned whether former slaves really understood what freedom meant, so too they doubted whether they really knew what the war was about or understood the complex maneuvers of the military and government. But on the ground, contraband demonstrated that they understood a great deal and felt themselves part of the larger Union struggle.

The following prayer, which is worth quoting at length, illuminates some of the ways that contraband understood the war and their relationship to it. Given by an unidentified male contraband at a graveside service in Beaufort, North Carolina, the prayer reveals how some African Americans situated themselves in this conflict that was both deeply personal and bigger than them.

Help us for our own good and de good ob God’s blessed Union people, dat want all people free whosomebber be de color. Massa Jesus, you know de deep tribulations of our hearts, dat sickness is among us, dat our children is dying in de camp, and as we tote dem from one place to tudder, and bury dem in de cold ground, to go in spirit to de Gob ob de people where de soul

hab no spot nor color. Great King ob Kings, and Doctor ob Doctors and God oh Battles, help us to be well, help us to be able to fight wid de Union sogers, de battle for de Union ; help us to fight for liberty, fight for de country, fight for our own homes, and our own free children and our children's children. Fetch out, God ob Battles, de big guns wid de bustin shells, and give dem God-forsaken secesh dat would carry to shame our wives and daughters. Oh, ... make em glad to stop de war and come back to shoes, to de fatted calf, and de good things ob de Union. No more murdering broder ob de North States. No more ragged, bare feet. No more slave whippers and slave-sellers. No more faders ob yellow skins."²⁶⁹

In the language of this prayer (which was not unusual), one sees how the contraband wove the issue of slavery and freedom into the larger Union cause. The prayer speaks to the contrabands' suffering and sacrifice, not only in slavery but in the difficult transition to freedom; but this experience is placed in the larger context of national suffering and sacrifice during this war, as brothers fight brothers and millions endure deprivation. The speaker knows they are fighting for their individual freedom – for their homes and their children and grandchildren – but those struggles are again placed in the larger context of fighting for the principle of liberty, fighting for the nation, and fighting to restore the Union, to make the South “glad to stop de war and come back to ... de good things ob de Union.” Making the nation whole again will mean an end to the travesty of “... [brother] murdering broder,” but also to the travesty of “faders ob yellow skins,” who so often owned their own children. The speaker ties contrabands' fate to the fate of the nation and asks for the strength to be part of this battle. Although he is clearly focused on the military conflict, the speaker's opening comments about the heartache, sickness, and loss that contraband men, women, and children were experiencing suggests that

²⁶⁹ “Beaufort, North Carolina, April 8, 1864,” *Freedmen's Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864).

those civilians also had a claim on the nation based on the sacrifices they were enduring.

Scholars have written about the ways that previously excluded or marginalized groups tried to claim additional rights and authority on the basis of their service and sacrifice during and after the Civil War. White women in the North and South insisted on their right to a greater role in government and politics based on the individual sacrifices and suffering they endured during the war, as well as their devotion and service to the men in their respective armies. African American men have primarily been seen as claiming citizenship for themselves and “the race” through their military service, with little attention given to the bravery shown or sacrifices endured by civilians. As historian Stephen Kantrowitz argues, formerly enslaved men’s service in the armed forces was critical to fulfilling the nineteenth-century ideal that liberty must be won through struggle.²⁷⁰ But, as we know, liberty was not simply handed to *any* of the contraband, including those who never took up arms. Before and after their escapes, contraband faced the same hunger, deprivation, destruction, and dangers that whites on the Southern home front would later speak of surviving. When they made their escapes, African American men and women exhibited bravery, strength, and endurance that spoke to the value they placed on liberty and what they were willing to sacrifice to achieve it. The significance of African American *women’s* war-time sacrifices has particularly been overlooked in discussions of former slaves’ claims to citizenship.²⁷¹ While some

²⁷⁰ Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom*, 177-180, 264.

²⁷¹ I do not mean to discount the important work that some scholars have done on enslaved women’s experiences and contributions during the war and in the transition to freedom. However,

whites may have seen black women as “pretenders to citizenship” and their freedom as “unearned,” when contraband women spoke about war-time conditions on the plantations and their successful escapes, they represented themselves as sharing in the national burden and heroically contributing to the quest for emancipation.²⁷²

Contraband spoke to northerners about the increasing hardships and violence they experienced as a result of the war. On the plantations, there was a shortage of food and clothing. When Union soldiers moved through a territory, they frequently confiscated and consumed every resource in sight.²⁷³ Families were separated as slave owners forced slaves into service for the Confederate Army and sold or refugeed their slave property. Slaves faced increased surveillance, hostility, and violence from their masters and mistresses, as southern whites tried to maintain control of the slave population and make a brutal example of any slave caught trying to escape.²⁷⁴ Many of these trials continued for the contraband after they reached Union lines, where they continued to experience hunger and want,

contemporary rhetoric about blacks' claims to citizenship – immediately after the war and in the subsequent construction of collective memories of the war – focused overwhelmingly on the significance of black men's military service acting as a claim for African American men *and* women. My findings draw attention to the ways that contraband women's wartime testimony and actions constituted a separate, participatory claim to citizenship based on their sacrifice and struggles during the war.

²⁷² Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 213. My conception of “civilians” is obviously not limited to women. The civilian contraband population included men, women, and children; and even those men who went on to join the Union army began their fight for liberty as civilians, when they endured increasingly hostile conditions on the plantations and subsequently made their escapes. I do, however, place special emphasis on contraband women here partly because my sources contain more women's testimony, but also because the significance of women's war-time flight has received very little scholarly attention and the stories women told about their escapes provide a unique perspective that is simply not available in other sources, such as the antebellum slave narratives overwhelmingly authored by men.

²⁷³ “Aid for the Contrabands,” *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), March 8, 1862.

²⁷⁴ *Dear Ones at Home*, 42; “Traces of the Institution,” *Freedmen's Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864); Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 140-142, 178; “Extracts of Letters from Teachers,” *Freedmen's Journal* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1865), 4-5; “The Proclamation Among the Contrabands,” *American Missionary*, February 1863; Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 253.

inadequate shelter, sickness and death, loss and separation of family members, and the dangers attendant to remaining in war-torn territory. Some whites perceived the contraband who arrived at Union lines in desperate condition as needy and helpless, but African American advocates frequently reminded the public that it was the “ravaging power of intestine war” that had brought contraband to that position.²⁷⁵ Far from being helpless, contraband *endured* and went to great lengths to secure freedom for themselves and their families. Individuals repeatedly testified that they were willing to endure any suffering “rather than again become slaves.”²⁷⁶

Although the Civil War sometimes brought freedom within closer geographical reach and presented new opportunities for successful escape, it did not lessen the dangers or trials which runaways faced. Contraband men and women spoke about going days without food, travelling great distances, crossing dangerous

²⁷⁵ A.M. Green described the ravages of war in these terms at a “meeting of the colored people” in Philadelphia in March, 1863. Green urged the formation of a society to aid the contraband, whose terrible circumstances he had observed on his recent tour of Fortress Monroe. See “Union Freedmen’s Relief Association of West Philadelphia,” *Christian Recorder*, March 7, 1863. The *Christian Recorder* often tried to draw attention to the fact that contrabands’ desperate condition was a result of the war rather than former slaves’ inability to support themselves in freedom; at the same time, the paper highlighted the ways that contraband were already contributing to the war effort and their own support during this transitional period. For some examples of this, see: “Aid for the Contrabands,” *Christian Recorder*, March 8, 1862; “Harrison’s Landing,” *Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1862; “Falsehood Refuted,” *Christian Recorder*, August 2, 1862; “For the *Christian Recorder*,” *Christian Recorder*, September 22, 1862; “Contrabands,” *Christian Recorder*, December 6, 1862; “For the *Christian Recorder*,” *Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.

²⁷⁶ Lucy Chase wrote about visiting with contraband women who expressed their willingness to suffer anything in order to gain their permanent freedom. One woman told Chase “that she was very willing to take her share of suffering and all who were in the room with us, said they would suffer still more, rather than again become slaves. The woman said she should die very happy, feeling that her children can spend “The balance of their days in freedom, though she had been in bonds.” See *Dear Ones at Home*, 41. There are many additional examples of contraband talking about the hard times and terrible conditions they’ve experienced since gaining freedom; almost invariably, the speakers frame these difficulties as sacrifices and suffering they are willing to make and endure for freedom. See “The ‘Freedmen’ at Cairo and Columbus,” *American Missionary*, February 1863; “Beaufort, North Carolina, April 8, 1864,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864); *Report of a Committee of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1862), 17-18; Sarah E. Chase to Mr. [Samuel] May, 18 Nov. 1864, Folder 9, Box 1, Chase Family Papers, 1787-1915, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

territory, and being hunted by dogs. The war made conditions even worse, as escapees had to navigate enemy lines, risked detection by Confederate troops, and sometimes came under fire.²⁷⁷ A correspondent for the *Christian Recorder* reported finding the bodies of three contraband – two men and one woman – who had been killed “while trying to escape to the Federal lines. The inevitable little bundle, which the runaway negro always carries, lay by each of them.”²⁷⁸ Remarking on the African American soldiers in his regiment, Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote that “There were more than a hundred men in the ranks who had voluntarily met more dangers in their escape from slavery than any of my young captains had incurred in all their lives.”²⁷⁹ Higginson recognized that the dangers these men faced as civilian runaways were as much a testament to their bravery, strength, and capacity as military service was. When contraband men and women gave voice to their personal escape stories, they challenged northerners to recognize that they were actively risking their lives in the struggle to free themselves.

Far from being passive recipients of freedom, contraband women liberated themselves and their children in large numbers during the war. Witnesses repeatedly wrote about women arriving in camp with their children after walking

²⁷⁷ “Traces of the Institution,” *Freedmen’s Advocate* 1, no. 6 (June 1864); Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 179; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 191-192; Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered*, 28-29; “Extracts of Letters from Teachers,” *Freedmen’s Journal* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1865), 4-5; Sarah E. Chase to Mr. May, 18 Nov. 1864, Folder 9, Box 1, Chase Family Papers, 1787-1915; “For the *Christian Recorder*, Louisville Correspondent,” *Christian Recorder*, January 31, 1863; Emma Bynum to Lucy Chase, n.d., Folder 4, Box 4, Chase Family Papers, 1787-1915; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 9-10; “Letter from Tennessee,” *Christian Recorder*, December 27, 1862.

²⁷⁸ “Letter from Tennessee,” *Christian Recorder*, December 27, 1862.

²⁷⁹ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 191.

great distances and facing myriad dangers.²⁸⁰ The difficulty of running with children was one of the reasons that so few enslaved women made successful flights for freedom in the antebellum. Those difficulties remained and, in some cases, were amplified during the war, but many contraband women nonetheless chose to run with multiple children in tow.²⁸¹ Women took the lead in these small parties, often travelling alone, as a family, and without male accompaniment; the family's survival and success depended almost entirely on these female ambassadors to freedom. One particular example challenges the narrative about enslaved women remaining on the plantation while their husbands escape and hoping they return for them one day. An enslaved couple, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, tried to run together, but they were caught and brought back. While whites on the plantation gathered to watch the spectacle of her husband's violent punishment, Mrs. Miller gathered together her 22 children and grandchildren in a nearby marsh and organized another escape. Higginson described how the group got on board an abandoned flatboat "under the old woman's orders" and travelled forty miles downriver until they encountered a Union gunboat and knew they had safely reached freedom. The husband she left behind escaped later on his own and eventually rejoined them.²⁸² It seems telling that Higginson relates the story of Mrs. Miller, as well as other contraband women

²⁸⁰ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 192; Colyer, *Report of the Services Rendered*, 28-29; Sarah E. Chase to Mr. May, 18 Nov. 1864, Folder 9, Box 1, Chase Family Papers, 1787-1915.

²⁸¹ Travelling with younger children, especially, meant being able to travel much less ground in a day, having to actually carry some of those children, extra mouths to feed along the way, a baby's cries to stifle, those children to worry about when crossing bodies of water or dangerous territory, etc. The increased surveillance and presence of white southerners during the war would have increased the risks of discovery.

²⁸² Unfortunately, Higginson does not give the woman's name; he simply identifies her as the grandmother of "brothers in his regiment named Miller." I have assigned her the name of "Mrs. Miller" on that basis. Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 192.

who escaped, in his memoir about *Army Life in a Black Regiment* and his chapter on “The Negro as Soldier.” When Higginson wrote about the bravery exhibited by runaways, he was specifically referring to African American men; but his attention to contraband women’s stories of escape in the same context suggests that he understood that African American women were showing the same bravery and strength when they made their escapes to Union lines.²⁸³ In a letter published in the *Anglo-African* in June 1863, activist Sattira A. Douglass wrote that the Civil War “is to teach us, regardless of sex and complexion, hard lessons of sacrifice, of courage, and of fortitude.”²⁸⁴ When contraband women and men spoke about what they endured in their flight from slavery, they represented themselves as part of this larger, national struggle.

“Yellow Osnabergs are their Detestation”: Dressing for Freedom in the Contraband Camps

When they defied the authority of their masters and mistresses by coming into Union lines, contraband men and women laid claim to a new status as free people. Legally and socially, their condition remained uncertain throughout the Civil War. But just as they did not wait for the *offer* of freedom before they risked their lives to escape, they did not wait for its constitutional protection before they

²⁸³ Higginson relates the escape stories of several contraband women in great detail. When talking about Fanny Wright, a company laundress and soldier’s wife, he intimates that her husband could take lessons in courage from her, based on what she endured during her escape. See Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 191-192.

²⁸⁴ Document 43: Sattira A. Douglas to Robert Hamilton, 9 June 1863 [in *Anglo-African*], in *The United States, 1859-1865*, ed. C. Peter Ripley, et al, vol. 5 of *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 212-215 [hereafter *BAP*, vol. 5].

began to publicly assert it. Through various acts of self-representation and public performance, contraband sought to mark, display, and perform their changed status for themselves and those that observed them. Without waiting for them to be conferred, contraband assumed the rights and privileges of a free people and performed their understanding of what freedom meant – not only an end to the physical and emotional violence of slavery, but also an end to their exclusion from the human and national family. Contraband wanted to signal a break with the slave past – this was not an erasure, negation, or forgetting of the lives they had led *under* slavery or what they had experienced as a result. Rather, it was a break with the controlling force that slavery, as an institution, had exercised over their lives. It was a break with that past *status* of “slave,” which symbolized the denial of their individuality and humanity, the restriction of their movement and actions, and whites’ exercise of arbitrary power over their lives.

Contraband men and women marked their changed status in various ways, most of which involved exercising rights, freedoms, and choices which would have been transgressive under slavery. One of the ways that contraband women, in particular, sought to enact and display their freedom was by making choices about dress and adornment.²⁸⁵ Many scholars have written about the performative and

²⁸⁵ My focus on women in this section, as individuals and as parents of children, is not meant to suggest that men were absent from the contraband population or that they did not also participate in this process of marking their new status (or their children’s new status) through choices about dress and adornment. When commenting on contrabands’ appearance at public events, men are also sometimes described as wearing particularly stylish and/or respectable clothing. However, the evidence I have found in my source base overwhelmingly focuses on contraband women with respect to clothing and choices about dress. Contraband women are actually over-represented in the historical record at times (in terms of the “contraband experience” as a whole) because they were a majority of the population in contraband camps and freedmen’s villages and the significant number of female aid workers who went south had more contact and interaction with female contrabands

sometimes transgressive nature of African Americans' clothing choices before and after emancipation. In this framework, "freedom" typically means post-1865 and the end of the Civil War.²⁸⁶ However, very little has been written about what happened *during* the war, as contraband slaves struggled to negotiate and define their changed status despite its legal uncertainty.²⁸⁷ The Civil War years were a period of disruption and violence, when individual choices were limited and material needs were often dire. Yet, war-time reports from the South reveal that even in the midst of war, contraband women perceived the symbolic significance of the clothes they wore and tried to make choices about how to represent themselves to others. When possible, they rejected clothing and fabric which they associated with their former condition and exercised choices that put individuality, style, and fashion above mere utility. For formerly enslaved men, the exchange of the slave's

than with men. With respect to children's dress, a few examples specifically talk about mothers, who would have been most likely to deal with children's clothing needs in any case. In many other cases, such as in discussions of the children's appearance and participation at school events, the writer simply describes "parents." It certainly seems likely that these audiences included both mothers and fathers, but given the nature of the contraband population in these camps, there were most likely more women/mothers in the audience than men/fathers.

²⁸⁶ See, for example, White, *Stylin'*; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Helen Bradley Foster, *"New Raiments of Self": African American Clothing in the Antebellum South* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997).

²⁸⁷ The primary exception is the work that has been done on the significance of African American men's donning of the soldier's uniform during the war. Many scholars do acknowledge the symbolic and transformative power of the soldier's uniform for African American men during the war years. For formerly enslaved men, especially, the exchange of the slave's rags for the soldier's uniform signaled a radical change in status and their symbolic acceptance into the national family. African American men's military service was seen as a critical part of former slaves' ability to lay claim to full freedom and the rights of citizens. No similar process of transformation and acceptance has been described for formerly enslaved women. However, I argue that women's war-time choices about dress conferred a similar change in status and were part of women's assertion of their new freedom and rights. For some contemporary references to the significance and transformative power of the soldier's uniform for African American men and former slaves, see the following: "District of Columbia Correspondence," *Christian Recorder*, October 5, 1861; "The President and the Colored People," *Christian Recorder*, October 12, 1861; "Extract from Wendell Phillips's Lecture at Cooper Institute," *The Liberator*, January 30, 1863; "Grand Emancipation Celebration," *The Liberator*, May 8, 1863.

rags for the soldier's uniform signaled a radical change in status and their symbolic acceptance into the national family. Choices about dress conferred a similar change in status on contraband women. Rather than donning a standardized uniform which signaled their national belonging, however, contraband women threw off the "negro cloth" uniform they wore as slaves in favor of clothing that allowed them to express an individuality they had always been denied. Contraband women used clothing and adornment as an integral part of their everyday performance of freedom.

Contraband women used dress to mark their new status in a number of ways, but the overriding theme is that these women were exercising choices and freedoms which they were denied as slaves. Historian Stephanie Camp has written about the ways that enslaved women tried to turn their bodies into sites of pleasure even within the strictures of slavery.²⁸⁸ Slaves typically received one set of clothing each year and were fortunate if they were allotted a pair of "Sunday clothes" for special occasions, in addition to their everyday work attire. Slave clothing was often made of a particularly coarse material and was meant to be functional and sturdy; indeed, an entire industry grew up around the production of inexpensive and low-quality "negro cloth." As Camp explains, "Planters dressed slaves in clothing of the poorest quality, made of fabric reserved for those of their station." Enslaved women's standard clothes were often androgynous and shapeless and did not entirely cover their legs, as was considered respectable among whites.²⁸⁹ Enslaved women did try

²⁸⁸ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 83.

²⁸⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 78-79, 82. For a detailed account of the "negro cloth" industry as it developed in one northern state, see Christy Clark-Pujara, *Slavery, Emancipation and Black Freedom in Rhode Island, 1652-1842* (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 2009), 207-228.

to borrow or procure additional material or clothing, altered and enhanced what they had by dyeing and starching it, and took pride in wearing and creating “fancy dress” for special occasions.²⁹⁰ Not all women had the resources or opportunities to do this, but even those that did were still operating within the confines of slavery. One of the most frequent occasions for women to wear “fancy dress” was at the secret frolics which slaves held at night, out of whites’ view. Women took pleasure in these events and in their dress and adornment – but everything they did was transgressive and potentially dangerous. Women could be punished for “borrowing” one of their mistress’s dresses; wearing the long, full skirts with improvised hoops made them more conspicuous to slave patrols and affected their ability to move quickly and get out of sight; what they did, they had to do in secret or only at special events orchestrated by their white owners.²⁹¹ In the contraband camps, African American women openly expressed their desire for finer things and wore those clothes for all to see.

One must understand the context of the freedmen’s aid movement and war-time clothing shortages in order to appreciate the full significance of the choices which contraband women made. Clothing was in dire need in the South during the war. Newspaper accounts, letters from the field, and reports from freedmen’s aid societies are positively full of references to contrabands’ desperate need for clothing, the almost naked state in which some of them arrived in camps, and the motley assortment of materials they sometimes stitched together when nothing else

²⁹⁰ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 78-86.

²⁹¹ For examples, see Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 83, 85-86.

could be found.²⁹² Many slaves typically received only one or two pieces of clothing for the entire year and, laboring in them daily, those clothes might be reduced to rags by the time they were replaced.²⁹³ The war disrupted the Southern economy, cotton production, and mercantile relations with cloth manufacturers in the North, all of which contributed to many slaves going without new clothes for extended periods of time. Gathering donations of fabric and clothes was one of the first and most significant efforts of the freedmen's aid movement, as organizations sought to address contrabands' material needs. Aid workers oversaw the distribution of clothing and supplies in the contraband camps; they decided who would (and would not) receive items when new donations came in, kept track of what each family received, and eventually oversaw the *sale* of clothing to contraband at reduced prices. When contraband women made choices about dress, they were often going out of their way to do so; rejecting readily available garments, paying for preferred items rather than accepting charity, and increasing their own workload by re-making garments to suit their tastes. They made these choices while the war raged on around them, with its attendant violence, deprivation, and chaos, often working against the assumptions and beliefs of the freedmen's aid workers who controlled those resources.

²⁹² For example, see Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 31-32; "Letter from St. Helena Island, April 4th, 1862," in *Second series of extracts from letters received by the Educational Commission of Boston, from teachers employed at Port Royal and its vicinity* [Boston : Published by the Educational Commission, 1862], 1; *Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Concert Hall, Philadelphia, on Tuesday Evening, November 3, 1863, to Take into Consideration the Condition of the Freed People of the South* (Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association) (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, Printers, No. 243 Arch Street, 1863), 17-18 [hereafter *Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Concert Hall, Philadelphia* (Nov. 3, 1863)]; "Extracts from Teachers' Letters," *Freedmen's Record* 1, no. 4 (April 1865), 63-65; *Dear Ones at Home*, 29.

²⁹³ Foster, "New Raiments of Self," 77.

When freedmen's aid workers solicited clothing donations or distributed items, they were primarily concerned with utility and function – clothing needed to cover the body, nothing more. One aid worker suggested that the easiest thing might be to procure some “cheap kind of striped cotton cloth, as their masters used to, and let the seamstresses among the black women make it up into garments.”²⁹⁴ Writing to the New England Freedmen's Aid Society, Lucy Chase urged, “Let all material be stout. Shirts made of bagging, or something of the nature of linen-crash, are very desirable.”²⁹⁵ The historical record does not reveal much about exactly what thoughts, beliefs, or assumptions went into aid workers' views of appropriate clothing for the contraband. On the one hand, one wonders whether they were simply oblivious or insensitive to the significance contraband might place on the first suit of clothes they donned in freedom, or what it would mean to them to continue to be dressed in the coarse “negro cloth” they wore as slaves. On the other hand, the way some aid workers scoffed at the idea of contraband women wearing “mere finery” suggests that perhaps these northern whites were *keenly* aware of the ways that clothing served as a marker of status. Some whites tried to undercut the symbolic power of contraband women's clothing by criticizing it as imitative and overdone, and by suggesting that fashion choices were a frivolous use of freedom.²⁹⁶

Contraband women explicitly rejected clothing, patterns, and fabric which they associated with their slave status. In a call for donations, one perceptive writer

²⁹⁴ “Letter from St. Helena Island, April 4th, 1862,” in *Second series of extracts from letters received by the Educational Commission of Boston*, 1.

²⁹⁵ *Dear Ones at Home*, 99.

²⁹⁶ McKim, *Freedmen of South Carolina*, 27.

commented that contraband women’s “taste is the same as ours” (as whites’). “The prettiest things—that is the things that we would consider prettiest—are always first chosen. Yellow osnabergs are their detestation ; they are ugly in themselves, and remind the people of their [previous] condition as slaves.”²⁹⁷ Reporting from the contraband camp in Alexandria, Virginia, journalist Ulysses Ward noted that the contraband would not, “if they can avoid it, wear any clothes which resemble in pattern their plantation dress. Striped dresses sent from New York of the same style as the coarse fabrics which they have learned to hate, but of a much superior quality, they utterly refuse to wear.”²⁹⁸ Lucy and Sarah Chase reported that they found several “rolls of Georgia gray upon the storeroom shelves” and began cutting the material into pieces to make dresses. But the contraband women preferred to use the material to make less-visible under-skirts, saying that Georgia-gray was for “field-hands.”²⁹⁹ For many contraband women, particular styles of dress, types of material, and colors or patterns called up associations with their previous slave status and lack of choice.

When contraband women made choices about dress and adornment, they were exercising as well as displaying a new freedom and independence. Members of the freedmen’s aid movement, in their paternalism, believed that their stewardship of former slaves required aid workers to teach contraband women proper housekeeping and domestic skills like sewing, and to encourage contraband

²⁹⁷ McKim, *Freedmen of South Carolina*, 27. “Negro cloth” was also known as Linsey, Osnaburg, and Kersey. See Clark-Pujara, *Slavery, Emancipation and Black Freedom in Rhode Island*, 207.

²⁹⁸ Ulysses Ward to *New York Evening Post*, April 29, 1863, in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 482.

²⁹⁹ *Dear Ones at Home*, 66.

to learn industry and thrift by asking them to pay something for their clothing once they had been in camp some time.³⁰⁰ But the reality was that many contraband women were expert seamstresses and had sometimes been responsible for clothing everyone on the plantation.³⁰¹ Some contraband women actually preferred to pay something for their clothing rather than accept items out of charity because it was a signal to themselves, as well as others, that they could support themselves in freedom, if given the opportunity.³⁰² What some white aid workers might have seen as tools for controlling and guiding the contraband population, many contraband women saw as a way to assert their independence. If you were paying for a garment, it was your right to choose it (and reject others) and to re-make it however you saw fit. Aid workers observed that some contraband women preferred to make up clothing themselves, or alter a garment, rather than wear the garments that arrived in camp ready to wear.³⁰³ Used to receiving clothing of the same material and cut as all the other slaves', and to inheriting their mistress's discards, perhaps contraband women disliked the idea of wearing second-hand clothing that was not made for them and took no account of their individual desires or preferences. When they made or re-made clothing, contraband women exercised choices about material, design, and style; tailored those garments to meet their individual

³⁰⁰ Writing from Worcester, Massachusetts, a member of the Freedmen's Relief Society advised Lucy Chase that the Society felt that the contraband should pay something for their own clothing and that of their children, whenever possible. "They will value the articles more will learn more self-reliance and feel more self respect than if they depend entirely upon charity." See *Dear Ones at Home*, 105.

³⁰¹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 81-82.

³⁰² See Letter from Harriet Jacobs, May 7, 1863, Quoted in the Second Report of a Committee of the Representatives of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends Upon the Condition and Wants of the Colored Refugees, May 27, 1863, in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 486.

³⁰³ "Letter from St. Helena Island, April 4th, 1862," in *Second series of extracts from letters received by the Educational Commission of Boston*, 1; McKim, *The Freedmen of South Carolina*, 27.

preferences; and effectively re-fashioned themselves as free women, possessing the same rights to pleasure, consumption, and leisure as white women.

Contraband women also expressed a desire for current and fashionable clothing – a fact which exasperated some white aid workers who believed that all contraband women needed was functional garments. For contraband women, one suspects that the idea of functional, impersonal, and interchangeable clothing (any dress was as good as another) was another reminder of their previous status and the way that they too were seen as undifferentiated and replaceable under the system that allowed them to be traded at market like so many cattle. A number of aid workers reported that contraband women coveted and fought for particular styles, while they rejected or re-made items that were seen as unattractive or out of fashion.³⁰⁴ Aid worker Julia Wilbur reported that she could not get rid of clothing that was “behind the times,” such as narrow skirts that could not be worn over a hoop. However, she noted, “All the dresses sent to me are such as white folks wear, & I can dispose of them at once.”³⁰⁵ Despite some white aid workers’ insistence on the impracticality of “mere finery” and “hoop-skirts,” contraband women actively expressed their preference for the same fashions which free persons had access to.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ Wilbur to Anna Barnes, March 10, 1863, IN *HJFP*, vol. 2, 460-461.

³⁰⁵ Wilbur to Anna Barnes, March 10, 1863, IN *HJFP*, vol. 2, 460-461.

³⁰⁶ In an appeal for donations, the Clothing Committee of the Educational Commission informed the public that “Mere finery, old cotton clothes so much worn as to tear on a slight strain, hoop-skirts, bonnets and unserviceable shoes, are not desired.” In fact, the printed appeal urged that it would be better for women to hunt “through their garrets and closets for old chintz curtains or furniture covers, which can readily be converted into excellent sacks and skirts for women and children.” A skirt made from an old furniture cover was preferable to a hoop-skirt. See Educational Commission, The clothing committee of the Educational Commission ask your attention in behalf of the negroes who have been or may be emancipated by the operation of the war. ... ([Boston : s.n., 1862]).

Contraband women also valued being able to provide their children with respectable and fashionable clothing.³⁰⁷ Certainly desperate people took what they could find; but when it was possible, parents and children went out of their way to exercise choice and discretion about dress.³⁰⁸ This took on special import in the context of contrabands' new attendance at schools. For contraband parents, the *right* to clothe their children as they saw fit was an important marker of the entire family's new freedom. Under slavery, white masters exercised the ultimate authority over what slave children wore; they distributed clothing and fabric, they gave instructions as to what types of clothing should be made, and they placed restrictions on the kinds of material, garments, and accessories which slaves had access to. Frederick Douglass famously wrote about the little stock which some masters put in slave children who were too young to work – providing little to no clothing for young children, caring nothing for modesty, and treating the slave child like a “wild thing” that did not deserve real clothes until it could earn its keep

³⁰⁷ One aid worker described the meticulous work of one mother who stitched together 24 pieces of cloth to make the skirt for her daughter's dress; despite the time and effort involved, the mother expressed the pride she and other women felt in being able to “make nice dresses for the little ones.” See “Edgerly Plantation, S. C.,” *Freedmen's Advocate* 1, no. 11 (Nov. 1864).

³⁰⁸ Children's clothing was also in dire need during the war, so it seems fair to suggest that many contraband parents were also going out of their way when they exercised choices about their children's dress. I emphasize this because I think it speaks to intent and significance. See the following for a few references to the shortage of children's clothing: *Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Concert Hall, Philadelphia* (Nov. 3, 1863), 17-18; “Mission to the Freed ‘Contrabands’ at Fortress Monroe, Va.: New Field of Usefulness,” *Supplement to the American Missionary*, 1 Oct. 1861. In this discussion it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the actions/choices of parents and the actions/choices of their children. Should children's improved appearance at schools be read as evidence of children's own desire to dress well and their own efforts to procure more attractive clothing, or should it be read as parents' choices and efforts with respect to their children's dress? Depending on the child's age and the family's particular circumstances, individual children would have different degrees of influence and/or control over their clothing options. However, it does seem likely that in many cases, children's dress was determined by some combination of the parents' and child's desires and actions. It seems fair to attribute some of these choices to contraband women, as mothers, while keeping such variables and uncertainties in mind.

through labor.³⁰⁹ Where masters might have seen African American children as idle, animalistic, and undeserving of real clothing, the mothers of those children now took care, in freedom, to acknowledge their child's inherent worth and to present them and their families as deserving of respect.³¹⁰ Taking care with their children's appearance at school and related events was a way for contraband to demonstrate and insist that their children were no longer primarily defined by the value of their labor to others; the clothes which contraband children wore represented their new access and *right* to childhood, individuality, and self-worth, as well as the right to embody the fashion and beauty standards of the day, "as if they were not black."³¹¹

Many freedmen's aid teachers commented on the children's improved appearance at school as a sign of racial progress. It was not only children's physical appearance, but their parents' ability to *send* them to school looking clean, neat, and tidy that whites saw as speaking to the capacity of the race and their progress

³⁰⁹ Frederick Douglass wrote, "The [clothing] allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these had failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year." See Douglass, *Narrative*, in *Autobiographies*, 21.

³¹⁰ Dress was one of the ways that contraband women explicitly rejected the authority which whites had previously exercised over their children. Aid worker Botume wrote about one instance in which contraband women refused to let their daughters wear the dresses they made in sewing school, under whites' supervision. The women believed that the dresses were too short and that it "was highly indecorous to have the feet and ankles show below the dress." They altered and lengthened the skirts before they would allow their daughters to wear them. See Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 236-237.

³¹¹ One teacher writing from St. Helena Island commented that she wished the public could see her students. "The girls are very particular about their dress. They come in their Sunday clothes, and look as trim and as pretty as if they were not black. When the girls of the second class were first transferred to the first, they came in looking rather dingy ; but when they saw how very aristocratic the others looked, they were aghast ; and the next day they appeared in great style." "Letter from St. Helena Island, May 21st, 1863," in *Third series of extracts from letters received by the Educational Commission for Freedmen, from teachers and superintendents at Port Royal and its vicinity* [Boston : Published by the Educational Commission for Freedmen, 1863].

towards freedom and independence.³¹² This was not only important in the everyday classroom, but also in the more public school exhibitions and recitals which contraband parents attended alongside whites; at such events, the dress and decorum of contraband children *and* adults was observed and studied for signs of racial progress. One northern visitor to a contraband Sunday school was impressed by the neat appearance and good behavior of the students, who he expected to be “a motley, lawless group of little, ragged, dirty children.” He was especially struck by the female students, many of whom “had neat straw bonnets, of the latest fashion, ornamented with a profusion of flowers and ribbons, and with such regard to colors, too, as might repulse every suspicion of disloyalty.” He was deeply impressed when Superintendent informed him that whites had contributed nothing to this effort. “... ‘Every one of them is dressed at the expense of their parents, from the proceeds of their own earnings since they have been here.’”³¹³

Contrabands’ changed status was expressed both in the clothes they wore and in the places and events to which they wore them. Freedmen’s schools held public examinations and recitals, just as schools in the North did, and were also frequently involved in celebrating holidays and important Union events. When

³¹² In December 1864, S. V. Lawton, a teacher in Alexandria, wrote that “The condition of the people is greatly improved since I first came to this city, as evinced in the comfortable appearance of their children ; the majority come with their clothes whole and clean, and present a neat and tidy appearance. The people feel a pride in being independent of the Government ; consequently there are but few dependants [*sic*], each one supporting his own family.” “Extracts of Letters from Teachers,” *Freedmen’s Journal* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1865), 7. Aid worker Anne B. Earle made this connection explicitly in 1864 when she urged Lucy Chase to have the contraband pay for their own children’s clothing. She wrote, “It seems to be the opinion of the Society that in all cases when the parents of the children are able to pay something for the clothes they have that they should do even though it may be only half price or less. They will value the articles more will learn more self-reliance and feel more self respect than if they depend entirely upon charity ...” See *Dear Ones at Home*, 105; also see Ulysses Ward to *New York Evening Post*, April 29, 1863, in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 481-482.

³¹³ *Report of a Committee of New York Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1862), 20-21.

children “dressed the part” for school and related events, they and their families were also asserting and celebrating their right to participate in events and rituals which previously excluded them, and to occupy and congregate in public spaces once forbidden. Commenting on contraband children’s performance at a Christmas concert, Reverend Lockwood recognized that a great change had taken place. “A year ago, white children in Hampton could enjoy a scene of this kind, but colored children were excluded. But now times have changed. The white man’s child is away, and the colored man’s child is on the stage, and swells the choral song.”³¹⁴ As Lockwood’s statement hints at, such events symbolized a dramatic change in status for both children and parents, as they publicly performed and proclaimed familial relations that could no longer be so easily severed. Dress was an important part of these individual and community performances, as contraband parents sought to mark the significance of their inclusion and participation in such events. While some aid workers might have been content to clothe women and children in shapeless skirts and “sacks” made from old curtains and furniture covers, many contraband women actively sought to clothe themselves and their children in something more befitting their new condition.³¹⁵ The way they represented themselves in public, through dress, was one of multiple ways that contraband asserted, displayed, and effectively insisted on their new status and new rights.

³¹⁴ “The Refugees,” *American Missionary*, February 1862.

³¹⁵ Educational Commission, Clothing Committee Broadside.

“My Country Tis of Thee:” Enacting Citizenship in Public Spaces

As we have seen, choices about dress were a way for contraband to mark and perform their new status on an individual level; when contraband attended public events and congregated in large numbers, the care they took with their appearance could also become a group or collective performance which spoke to white onlookers about African American capacity. Over the course of the war, contrabands – as a group – exercised and insisted on their new rights to occupy public spaces, engage with politics, and participate in celebrations of national events that were formerly closed to them. This was not just about laying claim to their new status and rights, but also about demonstrating their *worthiness* for freedom, citizenship, and full membership in the nation. Not waiting for those new rights to be conferred or affirmed through legislation, contraband preemptively exercised the freedoms and rights they associated with liberty and citizenship. As they performed their own understandings of what freedom must mean, they simultaneously showed white Northerners that they were invested in the nation’s future, ready and able to participate in the political process, and entirely capable of shouldering the responsibilities and rights of full citizens.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ Kate Masur makes a similar argument in her examination of African Americans’ claims to citizenship and equality in post-emancipation Washington D.C. Masur argues that, “Time and again, black Washingtonians demanded rights and privileges ahead of legislation. I call the claims they made in advance of the law ‘upstart claims,’ to emphasize that these were not claims to existing rights, nor were they supported by existing policies.” My research shows some of the ways that “contraband” slaves made “upstart claims” during the war itself, when their status was even more uncertain. Not waiting for the terms of their freedom to be defined by others or constitutionally protected, contraband preemptively claimed and performed their own understandings of freedom, citizenship, and national belonging. See Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7.

Whenever contraband assembled in groups large or small, or attended and participated in public events like school recitals or Emancipation Day celebrations, they were occupying public space that was previously closed to them. Fearful of slave rebellion and conspiracy, slave owners and slave states had explicit laws or codes which forbade slaves (and sometimes all blacks) from congregating in large groups; the definition of “large groups” varied, but in some cases it meant that no more than four slaves could be assembled at one time. Slaves sometimes transgressed these rules, but they did so under the threat of discovery and punishment. Free from the authority and surveillance of their masters, contraband now had the ability to assemble as they saw fit. No decree went out, informing contraband that these old restrictions on movement and congregation had been lifted; and it was not a new right that all African Americans simply took for granted.³¹⁷ Rather, contraband *claimed* those new rights for themselves when they gathered in public spaces and participated in public events. Sometimes former slaves occupied public spaces that were deeply symbolic, as when contraband and other African Americans attended a meeting in the House of Representatives in February 1865. Journalist Lois Adams commented on how remarkable it was to see “the dusky race” in the halls of Congress, “mingled promiscuously ... with Government officials, members of Congress, strangers, and citizens at large ...”³¹⁸ At other times, the simple act of gathering to watch their children perform in a

³¹⁷ Writing from Richmond, Virginia in 1865, Sarah Chase reported that she attended a committee meeting at which an African American deacon said that he felt off guard for a moment, being in a meeting where more than 5 African Americans were present, because he was so accustomed to living under restrictions against congregation under slavery. *Dear Ones at Home*, 155.

³¹⁸ Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 238.

Christmas concert spoke volumes about how much had changed.³¹⁹ Occupation of public spaces was a critical part of how contraband understood and performed their new status, for themselves and for the nation. Of course, what they did in those spaces also mattered and this section will explore some specific examples of how contraband claimed and enacted new freedoms and rights as a group.

Despite the fact that African American men would not legally have the right to vote until the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, formerly enslaved men and women took an active interest in politics during the war. Contraband laid claim to their membership in the nation when they actively followed and expressed a personal interest in Lincoln's reelection, thus imagining themselves as part of a democratic process that still formally excluded them. Observers frequently commented on contrabands' interest in the 1864 election and their prayers for Lincoln's success. A teacher in Norfolk wrote about "the enthusiasm with which the colored people here welcomed the news of 'Abraham Linkum's' [sic] election. One old woman said she could hardly eat or sleep, but prayed that he might be President."³²⁰ The African American patients and staff of the L'Ouverture Hospital in Alexandria, Virginia (also known as the Third General U.S. Hospital) took things a step further. While giving a tour of the facility to abolitionist Samuel May, the hospital's assistant-surgeon (whom May notes was African American) "informed [the group] that a vote for President had been recently taken in the hospital, and

³¹⁹ "The Refugees," *American Missionary*, February 1862; "A Sabbath School Gathering in Natchez," *Freedmen's Bulletin* 1, no. 9 (July 1865).

³²⁰ For this and other examples, see "Extracts of Letters from Teachers," *Freedmen's Journal* 1, no. 1 (Jan 1865), 5-6; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 17-18.

every vote was for Lincoln, not one for McClellan.” “If it depended upon the colored people,” the surgeon noted, “Mr. Lincoln would be the next President beyond a doubt.”³²¹ The outcome of this vote is not surprising. What is remarkable is the fact that disenfranchised African American soldiers and civilians staged a mock election within a stone’s throw of the capitol. May noted that the hospital served the “Colored Troops *and people* of Alexandria [author emphasis],” raising the possibility that African American women were among the “people,” or civilians, who cast their symbolic ballots that day. Not one of these individuals yet had the right to vote and freedom remained theoretically uncertain for all the reasons previously described. But the residents and staff imagined themselves as part of the national body. They asserted their right to participate in the election, their ability to make an informed decision based on their knowledge of political and military events, and their deep investment in the nation’s future.

Contraband also revealed their investment in the Union cause when they showed a keen interest in news of the war and participated in public celebrations of particular Union victories. Reporting from Washington, D.C., Lois Bryan Adams noted that African Americans followed war-time developments closely, reading telegrams that were posted for the public, buying extra copies of the daily newspapers, and carrying news to their friends and family. Contraband joined with the rest of D.C. in celebrating particular Union victories. Adams observed that every success on the field was especially meaningful to the many quasi-free African

³²¹ Samuel May Jr. to the Editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 30, 1864, in *HJFP*, vol. 2, 588.

Americans who still had “dear relatives in the fields and slave-pens and bloody trenches of the South.”³²² When they mingled in the crowds, heard and cheered war-time news, and listened to the patriotic and political speeches given at such moments, contraband were in effect integrating themselves into that body of citizens in the capitol. Contraband also organized their own gatherings to mark Union victories, bestowing on African Americans the authority to lead, speak publicly, and interpret national events. As with the mock election discussed previously, contrabands’ active celebration of important milestones in the war -- with or without whites -- also made an implicit claim that they were indeed qualified to be full members of the nation and to enjoy full citizenship.³²³

Not surprisingly, the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 became one of the most meaningful war-time developments for contraband to celebrate and commemorate. Although there was a long tradition of freedom celebrations for African Americans in the North, for most blacks in the South, war-time celebrations of Emancipation Day represented the first time they were allowed to publicly express their desire (and gratitude) for freedom and their hopes for what it would mean.³²⁴ Although it had its limits, the Emancipation Proclamation itself seemed to link those hopes to the Union cause and the future of the nation. Observances were an opportunity for contraband to display their

³²² Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 238-239, 253, 276.

³²³ For examples of their participation in such events in D.C., see Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 171, 238-239, 242-244, 251-253.

³²⁴ For more about the longer history of Emancipation celebrations, dating back to the 1808 abolition of the Atlantic slave trade to the U.S., see scholar Mitchell A. Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 116.

patriotism and gratitude to the Union, as well as to insist on the recognition of their changed status and their new relationship to the nation. Contraband men and women's performance and participation in these events was critical to African Americans' efforts to claim national belonging and citizenship.

Although many Emancipation Day celebrations in the South were organized and led by whites – including missionaries, freedmen's teachers, and Union army officers – African Americans were invariably the majority of participants.³²⁵ These events often included a procession, the presentation of swords and flags to Union Army officers or regiments, the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, prayers, music and song, and multiple speeches. Although African American troops were often a significant and symbolic presence, processions often included contraband civilians as well, including women and children. In contraband camps where freedmen's schools were present, contraband children often played a role in the festivities, singing patriotic songs and walking in the procession, while dressed in patriotic colors which their parents went out of their way to procure for them. In some cases, African American men participated in the speech-making; this included black soldiers, free black leaders, as well as contraband civilians. African Americans spoke about their changed status and their future in the nation, but also sometimes explicitly addressed their individual experiences in slavery as a testament to what freedom meant an end to. A closer examination of African Americans' participation

³²⁵ Whites' involvement as leaders and organizers of Emancipation celebrations was a war-time development. Before and after the Civil War, African Americans took the lead in organizing and planning such events. See Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*; Clark, *Defining Moments*; Blair, *Cities of the Dead*.

and performance at two particular celebrations of the Emancipation Proclamation – one in which the larger affair was dominated by whites, and one in which contraband and other African Americans took the leading role – reveals how contrabands’ participation in such events worked to demonstrate their desire, preparation, and readiness for full freedom and citizenship.

On January 1, 1863, contraband celebrated the final passage of the Emancipation Proclamation across the South. In the Union-occupied Sea Islands, white leaders organized and directed the festivities, which included the presentation of a United States flag to the African American regiments that marched and sang in the procession, the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, and a number of speeches by prominent whites, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Although some historians have characterized the event as entirely under white control, African Americans nonetheless worked to give meaning to the day themselves.³²⁶ Higginson estimated that 3-4,000 contraband were present at the celebration, the majority of them women; both men and women marked the day’s importance by wearing their Sunday best.³²⁷ The official program offered no opportunity for the contraband to make a vocal and public statement about what the Emancipation Proclamation meant to them, but they created that opportunity

³²⁶ For example, Mitch Kachun describes this particular event as entirely under white control and gives it very little attention in his chapter on war-time Emancipation celebrations. My closer analysis, based on multiple accounts of the same event, suggests the ways that contraband inserted themselves into the day’s event despite not having an official place in the program. For Kachun’s mention of this event, see Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 104.

³²⁷ For other references to contrabands’ dress and their use of it to mark the significance of their and their children’s participation in public celebrations during the war, see “Extracts from Teachers’ Letters,” *Freedmen’s Record* 1, no. 3 (March, 1865), 39-40; “Anniversary Celebration of the President’s Proclamation at Newbern; By an Eye Witness,” *Freedmen’s Record* 1, no. 2 (February 1865), 21; Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 171.

for themselves and, in the process, made one of the most heartfelt and meaningful contributions to the day.

Mid-way through the program and following Reverend French's presentation of a flag to one of the regiments, a few contraband standing near the stage began to sing "My Country Tis of Thee." Higginson noted the surprise of all present at "this interruption, not set down in the bills." Those few voices became many as other African Americans joined in the singing. Higginson, and no doubt other whites present, was deeply affected by this "utterly unexpected" performance, which made his and others' words that day seem "stupid" and "cheap" in comparison. "I never saw anything so electric," Higginson recalled, "... it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed." "Just think of it!" he wrote, "... the first day they have ever had a country, the first flag they had ever seen which promised anything to their people"³²⁸

Higginson was unquestionably moved by what he witnessed, but steeped in his own paternalism and romantic racialism, he wrongly characterized the performance as a "quaint," "innocent," and "wonderfully unconscious act." It may not have been planned in advance, but that does not mean that contraband lacked intent. They chose, in that moment, to interrupt a program organized and led by whites; to pay homage to the flag and their new claim to it despite the fact that the program made no room for their response or participation. Higginson suggested that the contraband sang "as if they were by their own hearths at home," but this was *not* like singing at home; this was an acapella performance at a gathering of

³²⁸ Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 30-31.

4,000 people on a day which symbolized contrabands' new claim to the nation. They voiced that claim at a time when their status and future remained uncertain, implicitly calling on the nation and Northern whites specifically to carry out what the Proclamation seemed to promise was possible.³²⁹ Singing, often led by contraband women, was an important part of most war-time Emancipation Day celebrations in the South and white viewers never failed to comment on the significance of hearing former slaves sing "My Country 'tis of Thee" and other patriotic songs.³³⁰ These performances allowed contraband, as a group, to demonstrate their devotion to and reverence for the nation, as well as their insistence that they were now part of the nation in a way they never had been before.

One year later, on the first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the freedmen of the South Carolina Sea Islands organized and carried out an elaborate "celebration of the birth-day of Liberty in the South."³³¹ The previous November, representatives of the contraband asked General Saxton for permission to organize the event independently, stating their belief that "this move by the colored people themselves will tell for their improvement and their capacity for self-government, as well as being an exhibition of their high appreciation of freedom

³²⁹ Also see Kachun for more about the significance and message of war-time Emancipation celebrations in the South, where African Americans came together in large numbers. Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 115-117.

³³⁰ For other examples of contrabands' singing of patriotic songs at public gatherings, see Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 75-76; "A Letter from an Observer," *Christian Recorder*, July 16, 1864; "The Refugees," *American Missionary*, February 1862; Adams, *Letter from Washington*, 238-239; "The Proclamation Among the Contrabands," *American Missionary*, February 1863; "Extracts from Teachers' Letters," *Freedmen's Record* 1, no. 3 (March 1865), 39-40; "Sunday School Meeting in Beaufort," *American Missionary*, June 1863.

³³¹ "Celebration of Freedom's Birthday in the South," *Christian Recorder*, December 26, 1863.

without the influence of extrinsic pressure.”³³² The missive was signed by African American missionary James Lynch, as well as Jacob Roderson, Peter White, Frank Barnwell, and George Brown. Roderson, White, and Barnwell each signed only with “his X mark,” suggesting that they were among those recently freed. The committee of five approached Saxton with their detailed proposal only after consulting with the local contraband population, who confirmed their desire for a grand celebration. Whereas one year earlier, in the previous example, the Emancipation Day celebration was entirely organized by whites and left little official room for contraband civilians’ participation, the 1864 celebration in Port Royal was primarily organized by contraband and other African Americans, who played a leading role in its proceedings.³³³

The January 1864 celebration in Port Royal had many features in common with other Emancipation Day celebrations: a grand procession that included African American regiments, the presentation of swords to General Saxton and Higginson, multiple orations, music, and a communal feast at its conclusion. But this event, organized by the freedpeople themselves, was also distinct in some ways, especially in the primacy it gave to African American participants. Some estimated that there were as many as “five thousand contrabands present.”³³⁴ General Saxton,

³³² “Celebration of Freedom’s Birthday in the South,” *Christian Recorder*, December 26, 1863.

³³³ In his broad study of African American emancipation celebrations, Mitch Kachun mentions this Jan. 1864 celebration in Port Royal only briefly and does not acknowledge the role that freedmen played in its organization. Kachun credits African American missionary James Lynch, but does not acknowledge the four other men (most likely recently freed) who sent the request to General Saxton. Instead, Kachun says that Lynch alone “worked in conjunction with the U.S. military establishment to organize a huge event in Beaufort.” While Kachun only references one source for this event, my analysis is based on four different accounts of the event and its planning, each of which reveals unique aspects of the program. See Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 114.

³³⁴ Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 75.

Higginson, and other white officials sat on the platform not as officiators, but as invited guests. The “Civil and Military Procession” included virtually every African American in the vicinity, allowing for the direct participation of contraband civilians en masse – men, women, and children – in addition to black troops. Among the civilians represented were the “Colored laborers and mechanics in Quartermaster’s Department at Hilton Head ... and Beaufort,” the “Schools of Beaufort and vicinity,” “Missionaries and Pastors of churches,” and the Freedmen of Beaufort City, Port Royal Island, Hilton Head Island, St. Helena Island, Ladies’ Island, and Paris Island. Several men were named to act as marshals in the procession, including three of the recently freed men who originally sought General Saxton’s approval for the event. Singing by the freedpeople was interspersed throughout the program.³³⁵ At one point, an African American woman, dressed as the Goddess of Liberty, led the crowd in singing “In that New Jerusalem.” As Botume described it, when the songstress began and “waved her banner, the entire crowd took up the chorus with a shout, -- ‘ In that New Jerusalem, / I am not afraid to die ; / We must fight for liberty, / In that New Jerusalem.’” “The effect,” Botume recalled, “was electrical.”³³⁶ Several African Americans gave speeches, including a number “whose lives [had] been made bitter by cruel bondage.”³³⁷ As James Lynch and the other men explained to General Saxton the previous November, the festivities that day were meant to show that “the

³³⁵ “Letter from South Carolina,” *Christian Recorder*, January 16, 1864. The men identified as marshals include the following: Jacob Robinson (most likely Jacob Roderson, from the letter to Saxton), Peter White, Frank Barnwell, Charles Pringle, Joseph Jenkins, June Harris, Renty Fields, W.C. Morris, Prince Rivers, and Prince Singleton. It is unclear whether all of these men were African American, but that seems likely.

³³⁶ Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands*, 75-76.

³³⁷ “Freedmen of Beaufort, N. C.,” *American Missionary*, March 1864.

colored people of this island and those in vicinity are more than ever before prepared to realize the value of liberty.”³³⁸ The men and women who attended and participated in the anniversary celebration demonstrated both that they understood and appreciated the value of their new freedom, and that they were “prepared to *realize*” [author emphasis] its value by taking on both the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship.

The contraband in Port Royal staked their claim to national belonging more explicitly in the set of resolutions which were read and adopted that day:

Resolved, 1. That we hail with great joy the first day of January, 1864, as the first anniversary of our existence as citizens of the United States, and we devoutly give thanks to God for hearing our cry, when in the house of bondage, and for opening the door of escape.

2. That we appreciate above gold the light of *education* and *religion*, which is now dawning upon us ; the richest blessings to us and our children.

3. That we honor and love the name of Abraham Lincoln, by whose proclamation the shackles fell from our hands one year ago to-day.

4. That we regard General Butler as the true friend of the colored race, whom God has raised up for the hour.

5. That we are determined, by our orderly, temperate, and patriotic conduct, to compel even our enemies to own that we are worthy to be free.

6. That since the old flag is committed to our hands as the signal of Justice and Liberty to ourselves and our children forever, we will *proudly* bear it aloft in the storm of battle, and show to a doubting world that we choose the *death of a hero rather than the life of a slave*.³³⁹

³³⁸ “Celebration of Freedom’s Birthday in the South,” *Christian Recorder*, December 26, 1863.

³³⁹ “Freedmen of Beaufort, N. C.,” *American Missionary*, March 1864.

A number of points stand out in these resolutions. First, the contraband declared that they were celebrating “the anniversary of our existence *as citizens* of the United States” [author emphasis]. This grand interpretation of the Emancipation Proclamation was not based on their failure to understand its legal meaning or limits; the entire text of the Proclamation was read at the event and there are multiple examples of contraband demonstrating that they understood the nuances and limits of the Act.³⁴⁰ Rather, the contraband were once again preemptively claiming the status of citizens more than five years before that would be a constitutional reality, perhaps reminding northerners that freedom was only meaningful if it meant this change in their political status too.

Second, the fifth resolution reveals that the contraband are keenly aware of the “great crowd of witnesses” who read their appearance and behavior like tea leaves to tell the future of the race. By their “orderly, temperate, and patriotic conduct,” they sought to demonstrate that they are worthy of freedom and capable of exercising new rights with restraint. This is about the way they represent themselves as individuals and as a people at this event and in other public spaces, but also about the myriad ways they express, perform, and demonstrate their devotion to the nation and the Union cause. That patriotism was not only about African American men’s service in the Union Army, but also about the way that contraband men and women spoke about their willingness to endure any sacrifice in

³⁴⁰ On the Emancipation Proclamation being read at this event, see “Letter from South Carolina,” *Christian Recorder*, January 16, 1864. For other examples of the Proclamation being read at celebratory events and/or of contraband having a more nuanced understanding of its terms and limits, see: “The Proclamation among the Contrabands,” *American Missionary*, February 1863; Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 29; “Anniversary Celebration of the President’s Proclamation at Newbern; By an Eye Witness,” *Freedmen’s Record* 1, no. 2 (February 1865), 21.

pursuit of freedom; their interest and participation in politics; the reverence they paid to Lincoln, certain Generals in the Union Army, and the Army itself; and their commitment to the Union cause, which they understood both as the path to their own emancipation and a defense of the principles of liberty on which the nation was built.

Although the final resolution seems to implicitly refer to African Americans' willingness to go to battle as part of the military, it is a resolution adopted by the whole. Every contraband present – man, woman, and child – symbolically pledged their willingness to sacrifice, endure hardship, and face danger; to die a “hero” rather than live once more as a “slave.” Remembering contraband women’s stories of what they suffered in their escapes to Union lines, it is not difficult to imagine that this category of “hero” applied to them as well. As they assembled by the thousands, occupied public spaces formerly closed to them, and commemorated the first national holiday they could claim as their own, contraband performed their own understandings of freedom and their capacity and desire to live as full citizens in the nation.

The Civil War was a critical moment in the ongoing national debate about race and slavery. It was a period of great change and great potential. It brought thousands of white northerners into direct contact with slavery and enslaved men and women for the first time. It exposed the “peculiar institution” which so many northerners had been content to ignore, implicitly sanctioning the practice of chattel slavery with their silences and averted gazes. It moved debates about slavery and

abolition from the peripheral territory of so-called radicals to the center of national discussion. And it created an opportunity for thousands of enslaved and quasi-free people to be part of that discussion – not as passive subjects, but as active and vocal participants. Through their personal testimony and actions, contraband offered the larger public an intimate portrait of slavery’s abuses, as well as an image of what freedom might look like on the ground. Their diverse acts of self-representation effectively challenged the Union’s hands-off policy toward slavery, as well as whites’ understanding of African Americans’ contributions to the war and investment in the nation. As the nation continued to debate slaves’ future, contraband performed *and enacted* their own understandings of freedom, insisting on authority over their own bodies and preemptively claiming the rights of citizenship.

**CHAPTER THREE:
“THE BEST REPRESENTATIVES OF THEIR RACE!”: SLAVERY AND
AUTHENTICITY ON THE POSTBELLUM STAGE**

In the years following the Civil War, representations of the slave experience continued to occupy the public stage and play an important role in shaping, re-affirming, and challenging beliefs about race, African American character and capacity, and the value of freedom. Many of these debates took place in the context of efforts to construct a shared public memory about the Civil War – about what it had been fought for, the significance of the sacrifices made on all sides, and the most important consequences and legacy of that conflict. Representations of race and slavery in popular culture were part of that process of constructing a meaningful narrative about the war and the formal stage was an important venue for those ideas. Just as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (in print and on stage) had helped to shape understandings about race and slavery before the war, “Tom” shows continued to proliferate in the postbellum years, as audiences made connections between those antebellum images and the war for the Union which followed. While “Tom” shows remained overwhelmingly white, African American performers gained access to other kinds of stage productions in unprecedented numbers in the post-war decades. Whether they appeared in minstrel shows, musical dramas, or renditions of the jubilee songs, African American performers reached tens of thousands of individual audience members between 1865 and the early 1890s, contributing to

the public's understanding of slavery and race in the process.³⁴¹ These performers asserted their authority to represent black characters and the institution of slavery by insisting on their racial authority and authenticity, in contrast to whites in blackface, thus reclaiming control over the representation of blackness and slavery on stage. They sustained a black-authored memory of slavery during an era when Northern whites were increasingly distancing themselves from that past and the sectionalism associated with it. In so doing, they contributed to a larger Northern memory of slavery and the war that, though sometimes compromised, continued to emphasize the trauma and abuses of slavery and represent emancipation as a positive good.

The significance of African Americans' staged productions in contributing to Civil War memory cannot be fully appreciated without discussing the current parameters of the field. Studies of Civil War memory are significantly divided along lines of region and race. Following David Blight's work in *Race and Reunion*, scholars have focused on three primary collective memories of the Civil War. One memory was constructed by white northerners who came to favor reconciliation after initial years of bitterness – focusing on the restoration of the union and the shared sacrifice and bravery of white soldiers both North and South. Another

³⁴¹ For example, in her examination of the play *The Underground Railroad*, or *Peculiar Sam*, written by Pauline Hopkins and performed by the Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company, scholar Carol Allen notes that a single performance of *The Underground Railroad* in Boston, July 1880, drew an audience of 10,000. Carol Dawn Allen, *Peculiar Passages: Black Women Playwrights, 1875-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 36. Music scholars Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff note that a newspaper reported that the African American minstrel troupe, Richards & Pringle's Georgia Minstrels, drew "in the neighborhood of 5,000 people—4,000 Negroes and 1,000 whites," to an 1896 performance in Memphis. Quoted in Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 106.

memory was held by white southerners who tipped their hat to the national reconciliationist narrative which let them reclaim a place in the union, but ultimately kept alive a belief in the rightness of their cause, the necessity and naturalness of white supremacy in political and social terms, and a romanticized view of the antebellum South and its peculiar institutions, which they had sought to defend. And, finally, a third memory was sustained by African Americans, which focused on slavery as the cause of the war and emancipation as its greatest consequence.³⁴² In the first years after the war, some white northerners championed the emancipationist legacy as well, but over time it came to be a narrative primarily sustained within the African American community in events like Emancipation Day celebrations.³⁴³ Overall, scholarship on Civil War memory has done very little to bring these three visions into conversation with each other – most scholars focus on one of these regionally and racially defined groups.

Most studies take for granted that the emancipationist legacy which African Americans sought to preserve was only sustained within black communities and did

³⁴² For his own part, Blight argues that the reconciliationist narrative ultimately triumphed over that of emancipation. Reuniting the (white) North and South took precedence over maintaining a commitment to black rights. Once national reconciliation was secure (and the North left the South to itself), the white Southern narrative regarding the Lost Cause, the “Old South,” and white supremacy was not only free to flourish below the Mason-Dixon line, but also became more palatable to the nation as a whole. African Americans struggled to sustain a memory of the emancipationist legacy for themselves in a hostile climate, but in many ways this memory was lost on the national level. Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

³⁴³ Memory scholar Mitch Kachun writes, “As Jim Crow solidified, white support declined and black celebrations gradually retreated into a more racially segregated public sphere in both the North and the South.” See Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 175. For more on the evolution of the Northern/Union whites’ support of the emancipationist legacy, see David W. Blight, “Decoration Days: The Origins of Memorial Day in North and South,” in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, ed. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Blair, *Cities of the Dead*, 23-76.

not reach or influence the larger white public.³⁴⁴ However, if we broaden our view of African American memory to include the work of black performers, it becomes evident that groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers created representations of slavery, emancipation, and the war's legacy that stood to impact collective memories beyond the borders of the black community.³⁴⁵ The potential impact of black performance on Civil War memory has been overlooked partly because memory scholars have been slow to consider cultural productions like theater in the context of Civil War memory; and because scholars of African American theatre generally dismiss the 1860s-1880s as a period when black performers had little autonomy and were compelled to reproduce the racist stereotypes associated with white minstrelsy.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Of course I am talking about events beginning in the 1870s, following the more active involvement of some northern whites and abolitionists in such celebrations. See, for example, Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*; Blair, *Cities of the Dead*; Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 219-264; Clark, *Defining Moments*. Clark actually does more to put white and black Southern memory in conversation with each other and sheds light on how African Americans' claiming of public space in early Emancipation Day celebrations actually inspired white southerners to take back the public landscape by erecting Confederate monuments and holding more memorial events of their own. However, this "influence" on the white public falls outside of my own line of inquiry, which focuses more on African Americans' capacity to influence whites outside the South.

³⁴⁵ For example, historian Anne Marshall is one of the few memory scholars who does consider the way that debates about how to remember slavery and the Civil War could revolve around popular productions like theater and film. See Marshall, "The 1906 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Law and the Politics of Race and Memory in Early-Twentieth-Century Kentucky," in *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 3 (Sept. 2011): 368-393.

³⁴⁶ Many theater and performance scholars characterize this period of black performance (1860s-1880s) as being dominated and overwhelmed by racist stereotypes and, thus, overlook it in their detailed studies of a later period. For example, see Lynn Abbott, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, Coon Songs, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Louis Onuorah Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darker": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006); David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Working in the 'Kingdom of Culture': African Americans and American Popular Culture, 1890-1930," in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-42.

However, my own research into this neglected period suggests that African American performers engaged the public through multiple mediums and constructed their own representations of race and slavery in a way that often challenged contemporary racial discourse. Once we acknowledge the complexity of black performance during this period, it makes sense to re-interrogate our assumptions about what messages white audiences may have received.

This study offers a closer examination of three different types (and groups) of post-bellum African American stage performance. In the first section, I look at the work of African American minstrel troupes who claimed a new authority to represent blackness and slavery in the wake of the Civil War. This section takes a closer look at the actual content of these shows, including the very specific representations of slave life therein; the “carry-me-back” nostalgia songs which were increasingly popular after the war; and the performance of military scenes and drills. In the second section, I turn my attention to the Hyers Sisters Dramatic Co. and two of the musical dramas they performed on the topic of slavery and emancipation. I look at the hybrid nature of these performances, as plays were performed within the context of larger shows that presented a variety of music and material, and the ways that these served to disrupt some audience expectations and stereotypes. This is followed by a close reading and analysis of the content of the two musical dramas and the ways in which they engaged with multiple strands of Civil War memory, while still presenting the traumas of slavery and representing emancipation as a positive good. In the final section, I examine the work of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an immensely popular group which constructed a sorrowful picture

of the slave past, while simultaneously insisting on contemporary civil rights. Together, these groups played an important role in sustaining the memory of slavery and contributing to public memories of slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation that reached a much broader audience than more traditional sites of African American memory performance, like Emancipation Day parades.

Remembering the “Old Plantation”: African American Minstrel Troupes

The post-Civil War period of African American performance is surprisingly under-studied. Most of the major works on African American theatre and performance history mark the 1890s and early 1900s as the beginning of a modern, more culturally autonomous black presence on the stage. Such histories often cast the preceding decades as a kind of “dark time,” defined largely by minstrelsy, in which African Americans gained access to the stage, but were fundamentally limited in the roles and modes of performance available to them, essentially reproducing the racial stereotypes first constructed by whites in blackface.³⁴⁷ David Krasner and

³⁴⁷ Scholars of antebellum minstrelsy have argued that the racial types portrayed on the minstrel stage hardened into the crudest of stereotypes in the 1840s and 1850s. Although they differ to some degree about when “minstrelsy” began, scholars of antebellum theatre are generally in agreement that prior to 1840 minstrelsy contained multiple and sometimes contradictory/conflicting messages about race and slavery. Beginning in the early 1840s and cementing in the 1850s, minstrelsy came to rely overwhelmingly on extreme and degrading stereotypes of African Americans. After 1840, however, minstrel songs lost their attachment to real political issues and became about representing more rigid stereotypes. Those who study turn-of-the-century performance seem to take for granted that minstrelsy remained largely unchanged in this regard for the next several decades, but my own work shows that the minstrel show underwent significant changes 1865-1900 and African American performers put their own stamp on the material. See, for example, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 137-140; W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 45; Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 65-68; Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 146-154.

other scholars characterize this period and African Americans' adoption of the minstrel form as an unfortunate stepping stone on the way to a *later* reclamation "and redefinition of white-controlled theatrical images of African Americans."³⁴⁸ Krasner and others argue for the complexity, reappropriation, and multiple meanings at work in African American performances from the 1890s on, even in cases where content continued to be deeply embedded in racism – but they seem reluctant to admit that African American performance in the earlier post-Civil War decades might also have contained such complexities.³⁴⁹ Largely dismissed, the actual content of African American minstrel shows post-1865 has received very little attention.³⁵⁰ A closer examination of the songs and acts which black minstrel troupes performed reveals that these companies did not simply embody the racial representations first constructed by white performers, but rather adapted and constructed their own representations of race and slavery in a way that sometimes challenged contemporary racial discourse.

³⁴⁸ Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 15. See, for example, Abbott, *Ragged But Right*; Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky"*; Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*; Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*; Brown, *Babylon Girls*; McAllister, *Whiting Up*.

³⁴⁹ See, for example, Marvin McAllister's analysis of the 1897 musical, *A Trip to Coontown*, and Davis Krasner and Louis Onuorah Chude-Sokei's studies of the Williams and Walker shows. McAllister, *Whiting Up*; Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky"*; Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910*.

³⁵⁰ Robert Toll's 1974 work, *Blacking Up*, still contains the most detailed research on African American minstrel troupes post-1865. He places them in the larger context of minstrelsy, as an evolving form of entertainment, throughout the nineteenth century. Toll finds that African American minstrel shows sometimes contributed to racial stereotypes, but also sometimes challenged them by modifying elements that existed in white minstrel shows. For example, he notes that the songs performed by black troupes sometimes expressed antislavery sentiment and worked against romanticizing the master-slave relationship. Historian K. Stephen Prince's recent work includes an examination of black minstrel companies in the 1880s and 1890s, but he comes to the same conclusion as theater scholars of the post-1890 period who see all black minstrel troupes as reproducing "white-authored stereotypes." See Toll, *Blacking Up*, 195-269; Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 177-187.

The opportunities for African Americans to perform on the formal stage exploded in the wake of the Civil War.³⁵¹ These new opportunities were unquestionably tied to emancipation and African Americans' changing status in society. Quite literally, emancipation gave freedom to some of those who chose to occupy the stage. Minstrels, jubilee singers, and other performers were sometimes former slaves, lately free from the war. Emancipation and the aftermath of the war also served to increase white America's interest in slavery and the South, even if only in an imaginative forum and not in reality. Perhaps because of the increased contact with African Americans which many northerners experienced during the course of the war, the public was ready to meet newly formed black minstrel troupes with the belief that "real negroes" could portray the "negro" character most authentically. Pressures created by changing social and political status also meant that more theatrical venues were open to African American performers (and audiences) than in the past.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Robert Toll identifies a total of 108 African American minstrel troupes that performed between 1862 and 1890. Toll documents 13 black troupes in the 1860s; 51 new troupes in the 1870s; 39 new troupes in the 1880s; and 5 new troupes appearing in the year 1890. The 108 individual troupes that performed 1862-1890 were sometimes on the stage for decades, and sometimes for less than a season. (Toll, Appendix, Chronological List of Black Minstrel Troupes, 1855-1890, in *Blackening Up*, 275-280.) Opportunities for black management of troupes were scarce and, thus, most troupes were owned and managed by whites. Although white owners and managers ultimately had authority over these productions, individual black performers nonetheless influenced the content of the shows based on their individual performances, specialties, choice of songs, etc. African American performer Tom Fletcher mentions that it was difficult for black managers because most venues were still owned by whites, who were reluctant to work with blacks on that level, but were willing to do business with white managers and advance agents. See Tom Fletcher, *The Tom Fletcher Story: 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (New York: Burdge & Company, Ltd., 1954), xviii. Charles Hicks was one of only a few African American managers; he was a performer, manager and organizer of several troupes over the course of his career. See Toll, *Blackening Up*, 205, 211-216.

³⁵² It is important to acknowledge that the African American minstrel performers I examine are overwhelmingly male. Minstrelsy remained a primarily-male performance venue in the first decades after the Civil War. On a few occasions, the Hyers Sisters appeared on the minstrel stage as guest stars as part of a larger show, performing solos and duets with male members of the minstrel company. After jubilee songs started to be incorporated into minstrel shows, following the success of

African American minstrel troupes claimed authenticity in multiple ways – emphasizing their “genuine” blackness, identifying members as actual former slaves, and suggesting that what they presented on stage was a “living picture” of life on the southern plantation, performed by men who had actually lived there.³⁵³ African American troupes also supported or authenticated these claims by including choice quotes from the (white) press on their playbills and other advertisements. These hand-picked excerpts from published reviews testified to the authenticity, naturalness, and superiority of black troupes in comparison to their white imitators. Critics frequently commented on the fact that seeing “the real thing” made the artifice of the white minstrel in burnt cork apparent. As one reviewer wrote, “We have come to the conclusion after seeing these colored artists that there is no use in a white man trying to play negro any more. He can’t do it. He may make a substitute that will pass current, but he’s a base counterfeit, and has not the ring of true

the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other groups, African American women were often part of large choruses of jubilee singers who performed in the background during scenes and sketches. With few exceptions, women did not, however, engage in other kinds of performance on the minstrel stage – as characters in sketches, acts, and plantation scenes, or as solo performers – until the variety shows of the 1890s and early 1900s. For more about African American women’s performance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Brown, *Babylon Girls*.

³⁵³ For additional examples of publicity materials that used the language of authenticity, see: Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, Halleck’s Alhambra, South Boston, June 13, 1881, playbill, Folder 429, American Minstrel Show Collection, 1823-1947, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University [hereafter AMSC]; Callender Minstrels with Haverly Minstrels, n.p., [May 5, 18[8?]4], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender’s Famous Georgia Minstrels, Beethoven Hall, Boston, April 2, 1877, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Alabama Minstrels, [Newport, Rhode Island,] Bellevue Avenue Gardens, n.d., playbill, Folder 228; Haverly’s Genuine Troupe of Blacks. Official Programme. London: Her Majesty’s Theatre, [1881], Harvard Theatre Collection [hereafter HTC]; Haverly’s Gigantic Colored Minstrel Carnival: Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, Niblo’s Garden Theatre, July 12, [1881], Folder 429, AMSC; Haverly’s Genuine Coloured Minstrels and Callender [sic] Colossal, Spectacular, Coloured Minstrels, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

metal.”³⁵⁴ White minstrel troupes were actually forced to move away from plantation material because they lost the cultural authority to represent it.³⁵⁵ When African American troupes presented themselves as “THE BEST REPRESENTATIVES OF THEIR RACE!,” they not only claimed the authority to usurp this white artistic form, but also implicitly raised questions about the representations of blackness and slavery previously constructed by whites.³⁵⁶

Black minstrel troupes’ reception among the African American population also prompts us to interrogate our assumptions about the content of these shows. It is unlikely that the many African Americans who attended black minstrel shows applauded and idolized these performers for simply embodying and reproducing white-constructed stereotypes. Evidence shows that African American minstrel troupes were very popular with many blacks, who attended shows in large numbers, often took pride in the performers, and enjoyed watching their own race on the stage.³⁵⁷ Many scholars mistakenly assume that most African Americans

³⁵⁴ See multiple reviews printed on The Original Georgia Minstrels, Horticultural Hall, [n.p.], January 29, 1873, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁵⁵ In a study of 200 minstrel sketches published 1840-1890, William Mahar highlights the range of topics that Ethiopian sketches engaged with, besides southern “negroes,” plantation life, or slavery. Mahar, “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840-1890,” *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean et al. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 179-220.

³⁵⁶ Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, Halleck’s Alhambra, South Boston, June 13, 1881, Folder 429, AMSC.

³⁵⁷ An article in the *Freeman* noted that a recent show in Memphis by the African American troupe, Richards & Pringle’s Georgia Minstrels, drew “in the neighborhood of 5,000 people--4,000 Negroes and 1,000 whites, the largest indoor paid audience ever known in that city.” Billy Kersands, one of the stars of that troupe, was such a sensation that when the Georgia’s were scheduled to appear in Houston, Texas, the black community in Galveston arranged to have a special excursion train to carry 400 black residents to Houston for the show. Quoted in Abbott, *Out of Sight*, 105-106. For other examples of black minstrel troupes’ popularity in the African American community, see: “Mascotte’s Musings,” *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), Nov. 29, 1884; W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), 42; Fletcher, *The Tom Fletcher Story*, 67; “Tribute to Tom M’Intosh: Sketch of His Stage Career by Sylvester Russell,” *The Freeman*

objected to minstrelsy and believed that it created and perpetuated a racist and degrading image of the race.³⁵⁸ Frederick Douglass said as much when he wrote about white minstrels in the *North Star*, characterizing them as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow white citizens.”³⁵⁹ However, Douglass’s scathing criticism of *white* antebellum minstrelsy is too often assumed to apply to “minstrelsy” writ large. Even Douglass acknowledged that the race of the performers mattered deeply. After attending a minstrel show with African American performers, Douglass wrote,

We are not sure that our readers will approve of our mention of those persons, so strong must be their dislike of everything that seems to feed the flame of American prejudice against the colored people; and in this they might be right; but we think otherwise. It is something gained, when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation

(Indianapolis, Indiana), April 9, 1904; “Trying to Get Away from Ourselves,” *Christian Recorder*, December 20, 1888.

³⁵⁸ Some African Americans continued to offer justifiable critiques of the racial content of minstrel shows even after African American performers took the stage post-Civil War, but in some cases their opposition was more grounded in a class-based, moral and religious objection to popular theater and music, more generally – a concern that was shared by some middle- and upper-class whites. In other words, some portions of the black community may have looked down on minstrelsy and strongly discouraged attendance at minstrel shows, but it was not necessarily because they objected to the racist representations that the minstrel show contained; in some cases, they frowned upon attendance at *any* kind of popular entertainment and, driven by the politics of respectability, were at least as concerned with the image of blacks *attending* minstrel shows as they were with the potentially racist content of those shows. These objections were not universal; Thus, African American criticisms of minstrelsy in the postbellum years should not automatically be read as an indictment of the racial representations contained therein. For examples of African Americans talking about moral, religious, and class-based objections to minstrel shows, see: Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 10-11, 32-33, 55-56, 59-62; “The Mirror Up to Nature: Re[mark]able Success of the N[eg]ro in the Mimic World,” *The Freeman*, December 19, 1896; “The Pacific Coast: Inducements Offered by California to the Industrial Immigrants--The Anti-Chinese Sentiment--Status of the Colored Citizen--A Sensational Clergyman,” *New York Globe* (New York City, NY), October 20, 1883.

³⁵⁹ Quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, 15 (*North Star*, October 27, 1848).

of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race.³⁶⁰

The fact that some African Americans found something entertaining and enjoyable in the minstrel show reminds us that performances carried multiple messages simultaneously and could be “read” differently by different audience members – but it also challenges us to make a closer examination of the actual content of post-bellum African American minstrel shows and the way they represented the race, especially when they tackled the subject of slavery.

While many scholars subscribe to the belief that minstrelsy remained “white performative property” even after African Americans occupied those roles post-war, a substantive analysis of the actual content of black minstrel shows provides a more nuanced understanding of the way that black performers could simultaneously satisfy and disrupt white audiences’ expectations for this genre of performance and the versions of blackness which they saw portrayed therein.³⁶¹ Not all material on

³⁶⁰ Douglass is quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, 36-37. It is worth noting that some post-bellum African American minstrel troupes also received endorsements from white abolitionists. A notice in the African American newspaper, *The Constitution* (Middletown, Connecticut) identified Callender’s troupe members as “all plantation darkies” and noted that “They have received commendatory letters from Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Lloyd Garrison, Emerson, P. T. Barnum and others.” Another newspaper notice noted that “William Lloyd Garrison, in sending them a letter of commendation, remarked: ‘It is gratifying to see that no imputation is brought against them of presenting anything offensive to the eye or ear.’” “Local Items,” *The Constitution*, June 16, 1875; “City Matters – The Minstrels,” *The Quincy Daily Whig* (Quincy, Illinois), December 13, 1876.

³⁶¹ In *Whiting Up*, Marvin McAllister argues that “black blackface artists [had] a profound lack of representational freedom. Blackface minstrelsy was white performative property; most colored performers did not control minstrel iconography or the troupes they travelled with, let alone the theaters in which they entertained. They could not undo or reimagine the Zip Coon and Jim Crow minstrel prototypes spanned by white artists and audiences, so these and other caricatures dominated the minstrel stage from the late 1820s into the 20th century.” Like other scholars of this period, McAllister characterizes late nineteenth-century African American minstrelsy this way as part of his assertion that African American performers did construct more complex representations of race in *other* types of performances. McAllister and K. Stephen Prince do make an important observation about the fact that African American minstrel troupes were almost exclusively owned and managed by whites. See McAllister, *Whiting Up*, 78.

the minstrel stage was explicitly raced or related to slavery, but much of it was – African American performers’ claims of racial authenticity made the portrayal of blackness, slavery and the old plantation the special purview of black minstrel troupes after the Civil War.³⁶² These troupes presented slavery as entirely Southern and on the plantation; a choice that protected white northerners from having to confront their own history of slavery, but also potentially protected some aspects of the slave experience from being sensationalized for white consumption. The minstrel show was first and foremost a form of entertainment and African American minstrel shows satisfied the audience’s desire for comedy, music, and dance by frequently representing slavery and the plantation as sites of merriment and celebration. While these representations no doubt contributed to the image of the so-called “happy plantation darky” which scholars are so critical of, they also placed that figure in a very particular context which suggested that such happiness and freedom stood in contrast to the everyday experience of slavery and was only possible when the slave population was free from the surveillance and control of the master.³⁶³ Indeed, some of the song, dance, and celebration which audiences

³⁶² Most of the material related to slavery appeared in the second and third parts of the show, although it is important to acknowledge that African American minstrels presented a variety of material that was not necessarily related to slavery or explicitly raced, including specialty dances, short comic sketches, stump speeches, and military drills. Based on my analysis of playbills, individual minstrel songs, acts, and scenes did not always refer to slavery explicitly in their titles or descriptions, but placed themselves in that context by frequently referring specifically to the “plantation,” specific southern locations, and one-time slave crops like sugar cane. For example, the end pieces had titles like “The Old Plantation; or, Away Down South in Dixie,” “Holiday on the Old Plantation,” and “Among de Sugar Cane.” For some examples of these types of references, see Haverly’s *Genuine Coloured Minstrels and Callender [sic] Colossal, Spectacular, Coloured Minstrels*, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender’s *Famous Georgia Minstrels*, Beethoven Hall, Boston, April 2, 1877, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁶³ For more on this stereotype of the “happy plantation darky,” see Lott, *Love and Theft*; Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

witnessed on the black-directed minstrel stage even occurred in an explicitly antislavery context; far from representing slaves as content with their subservient status, such scenes linked the “happiness” of slaves to their emancipation from bondage.

The slavery that was being remembered and represented on the minstrel stage was fundamentally limited. On a most basic level, it represented slavery as a peculiarly Southern institution. This allowed northern white audiences to continue to turn a blind eye to the North’s own history with slavery – a history marked by the practice of slavery itself, a paternalistic gradual emancipation that kept some African Americans in the North legally bound into the 1840s, and significant financial ties to the Southern slave economy.³⁶⁴ With the post-bellum minstrel show’s promise to faithfully portray the “old plantation,” slavery and slaves were relegated to the South and to the past – an idyllic and entirely invented time when human bondage was not a regionally divisive issue or a contributor to civil war. On some levels, the post-bellum minstrel show was a tool for national reconciliation in the same way that the boom in Southern tourism was; it allowed white northerners to participate in the depoliticized “plantation romance” which idealized the “Old South” as the embodiment of a simpler time and place.³⁶⁵ For black minstrels,

³⁶⁴ For more on the North’s history of slavery and their efforts to forget it, see Melish, *Disowning Slavery*; Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Nash, *Forging Freedom*; David Nathaniel Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁶⁵ See Nina Silber, *Romance of Reunion*.

however, this relegation of slavery to the Southern past may have helped to further “other” what they represented, insulating African American performers from the implication that the so-called “happy plantation negro” they sometimes embodied on stage was an embodiment of their own characters. As white minstrel troupes sought some way to distinguish themselves from the black troupes who audiences now preferred to see portray plantation scenes, one group advertised that it was portraying the many comic incidents which African Americans found themselves in since emancipation. Haverly’s American United Mastodon Minstrels promised to present

a new order of negro eccentricities ..., reproducing such phases of colored life as actually exist at the present time. One result of freedom has been to place the negro in many positions entirely new. The ludicrous incidents emanating therefrom have been made the subjects of illustration in the new Mastodonic creations ...³⁶⁶

While this white minstrel troupe suggested that freedmen could continue to be sources of low comedy, just as they had been as slaves, when African American performers presented material that focused on a southern slavery of the past, they distanced their contemporary selves from the comic types they portrayed on stage.

The Southern slavery depicted on the minstrel stage was also represented as taking place entirely on the plantation, thereby ignoring other sites of possession and aspects of the slave experience. The minstrel show’s focus on the plantation stood in contrast to the reality that in some regions many slaves were actually

³⁶⁶ Haverly’s American United Mastodon Minstrels, Her Majesty’s Theatre, Haymarket, London, [n.d.], Folder 429, AMSC.

owned in small numbers and did not labor on large plantations.³⁶⁷ Although the show's "plantation pastimes" sometimes played out among the crops which slaves produced for their masters' profit, those scenes did not expose the reality of slaves' labor in those fields of sugar cane and cotton – a reality marked by the lash; by the forced labor of the sick, elderly, and women in the advanced stages of pregnancy; and by the cries and fretting of young children which mothers were forced to leave alone in cabins while they worked. The focus on plantation scenes also ignored aspects of the slave experience that might take place beyond the confines of the cotton field, such as the auction block, the slave coffle, the jails where runaways were held, or the private spaces where masters could exercise further power over enslaved women.

Although there were dangers in presenting such a limited view of slavery, the choice to focus on the "old plantation" and very limited aspects of the slave experience also meant that African American performers weren't risking having those other sites and experiences trivialized and sensationalized in the context of a minstrel show. In the context of the antebellum antislavery movement, many former slaves wrote and spoke about the fact that there were simply some aspects of slavery that could not be "explained" or recreated for someone who had never experienced it – both words and empathy were inadequate for allowing outsiders to

³⁶⁷ By 1860, the majority of slaveowners owned 5-6 slaves, approximately ¼ of slave owners owned 15-50 slaves, and only a small elite of approximately 3,000 families owned 100 or more slaves each. A significant number of slaves worked on large plantations, but this was not a universal experience. Approximately 25% of slaves performed non-agricultural labor. See Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War*, revised ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 21-23.

truly “understand” some aspects of slavery.³⁶⁸ On some level, the black-authored minstrel show also respected the limits of representation when they offered white audiences such a narrowly defined view for their consumption and pleasure. African American minstrels may not have represented the anguish of the auction block for audiences, but they also didn’t render it comic. If this seems an easy choice given the presumed challenges of depicting that experience in a humorous and entertaining way, consider the fact that contemporary Uncle Tom shows regularly did just that.³⁶⁹ Music scholar Thomas Riis notes that the slave auction in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was “considered the appropriate dramatic moment in many productions for ‘slaves’ to demonstrate the full range of their abilities to prospective buyers,” including their skills as “banjo players, dancers, and singers.” Although this kind of representation carries echoes of some aspects of African Americans’ actual experience of the antebellum slave market (as illuminated by Walter Johnson), presenting song, dance, and merriment in that context could not help but sensationalize, trivialize, and *mis*-represent this aspect of slavery for many white

³⁶⁸ For example, in the preface to the revised edition of his published slave narrative, Henry Box Brown writes: “I have experienced a continuance of such kindness, as slaveholders have to bestow; but though my body has escaped the lash of the whip, my mind has groaned under tortures which I believe will never be related, because, language is inadequate to express them, but those know them who have them to endure.” In another instance, William Craft says in a speech, “The apologists of Slavery were also in the habit of asserting that the scenes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were overdrawn and exaggerated. He had read that book, and others upon the subject of American Slavery, and he solemnly declared that he had never seen a description in print which could, in the remotest degree, approach the reality of the thing itself.” Brown, *Narrative* (1851), 4; Document 79: Speech by William Craft, Delivered at Spafields Chapel, London, England, 14 Oct. 1859, *BAP*, vol. 1, 467.

³⁶⁹ Although it was common for (white) antebellum minstrel shows to include burlesqued material related to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an extensive examination of 100 playbills for 12 different post-bellum African American minstrel troupes finds no mention of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or its major characters in the titles and descriptions of the shows’ songs and acts. African Americans did perform in Uncle Tom shows, but those shows are not the focus of my analysis and the lack of references to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the playbills for black minstrel troupes suggest that it is appropriate to distinguish between these two venues for black performance.

audience members.³⁷⁰ Because it was pleasing to audiences, Tom shows also always included the scene of Uncle Tom being whipped to death by Simon Legree. Although this remained a serious dramatic moment (and was not turned into comedy), it also sensationalized that violence and made it into a spectacle for white consumption and voyeuristic pleasure.³⁷¹ There were certainly limits and disadvantages to the way that black minstrel troupes represented slavery, but when they chose to *not* portray sites like the auction block and whipping post, they effectively protected some aspects of the slave experience from white consumption and ridicule.

Absent some of the more harrowing aspects of life in bondage, the image of slavery that black minstrel troupes *did* present to the public sometimes suggested a rather carefree existence in which singing, dancing, and festivity were common features of life on the old plantation.³⁷² No doubt those cheerful portrayals did

³⁷⁰ Thomas L. Riis, "The Music and Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Music* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1986), 280-282. Walter Johnson writes about the expectation which some slave traders and buyers had that their human merchandise should make themselves desirable to prospective buyers by appearing happy, smiling, and sometimes actually dancing in order to show their physical fitness. See Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

³⁷¹ J. Frank Davis, "Tom Shows," *Scribner's Magazine*, Vol. 67 (1925), 351-353; Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 377-379. Tom shows sensationalized other violent aspects of slavery with the introduction of trained bloodhounds that chased Eliza across the ice during her escape. See J. Frank Davis's reminiscence on Tom shows (cited above) for a revealing description of how such dogs were trained and how the scenes were carried out. Davis, "Tom Shows," 356-357.

³⁷² Many of the titles and descriptions of songs and acts in these shows, as recorded on various playbills, hint at the comic, happy, and carefree portrait that they may have created. A playbill for the Callender's boasts that the African American performers' "delineations of the grotesque and amusing phases of Plantation Life, the Songs, Dances, Acts, Jubilees, Walkarounds, etc., of the Southern Plantations, have been everywhere recognized as the Genuine Negro Minstrelsy of America." See Callender's Georgia Minstrels, Opera House, [Ansonia?], June 22, [n.y.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. This example quite explicitly suggests that the plantation (or, at least, certain "phases" of it) was a place filled with singing, dancing, and amusement. Other acts also associate the plantation with dance and frolic. A "little Pickaninnies" act in Haverly's show performed "Canebrake Frolics," suggesting that the sugar cane field was a site of dance and fun. Haverly's Gigantic Colored Minstrel

contribute to the image of the “happy plantation negro” and reinforced certain stereotypes and assumptions. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that song and dance actually *were* part of some slaves’ lives, could offer temporary respite from the constant oppression of slavery, and were never indicative of enslaved men and women’s happiness in or contentment with the institution itself.³⁷³ One reviewer of the Callender’s Minstrels seemed to acknowledge this directly when he praised the “authentic” performance of singers and dancers “who but a short time ago were deprived of almost all other pastimes ...”³⁷⁴

Carnival: Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, Niblo’s Garden Theatre, July 12, [1881], Folder 429, AMSC. The final act in one of Callender’s shows, “De Ole Plantation, Or, Away Down South in Dixie,” includes a brief list of the sketch’s scenes, including intermittent references to “Happiness” on the plantation: “Going to Work. Happiness. The Letter. Bad Boys Feed the Pigs. Night. Happiness. Among the Children. ...” See Callender’s Original Georgia Minstrels, Beethoven Hall, Boston, [1875?], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. For examples of similar language in the titles and descriptions of various acts, see: Callender’s Famous Georgia Minstrels, Beethoven Hall, Boston, April 2, 1877, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender’s Original Georgia Minstrels, Robinson Hall, [New York], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Georgia Minstrels, [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; The Original Georgia Minstrels, Horticultural Hall, [n.p.], January 29, 1873, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, [Liberty Hall, New Bedford], [n.d.], Folder 429, AMSC.

³⁷³ In their published slave narratives, both Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northrup challenged readers’ assumptions about what slaves’ singing “meant” when they described the mournful nature of some of those songs; the way that slaves were sometimes forced to sing by masters, overseers, and slave traders; and the temporary relief that song could provide from slavery’s otherwise constant burden. Describing the merriment that occurred around the Christmas holidays, Solomon Northrup wrote, “Such is ‘southern life as it is,’ *three days in the year*, as I found it—the other three hundred and sixty-two being days of weariness, and fear, and suffering, and unremitting labor.” For quotes from Douglass and Northrup, see *Readings in Black American Music*, 2nd edition, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 83, 96-98, 101. Also see Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, 184.

³⁷⁴ The Original Georgia Minstrels, Horticultural Hall, [n.p.], January 29, 1873, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. In another case, the black minstrel troupe itself seemed to instruct the audience that happy singing and dancing represented only one part of the slave experience, and stood in contrast to the sorrow which was also part of it. A playbill for Len Spencer’s Minstrels, advertised the final plantation act as “Presenting a Stage Drawing in Ebony, Depicting with Fidelity the Negro Character in *Humor and Pathos*, Giving the *Light and Shade* of the Colored People in their Natural Environs” [author emphasis]. Len Spencer’s Greater New York Minstrels, [n.p.], Season of 1898-1899, playbill, Folder 465, AMSC. This language is reminiscent of the titles of some of the post-bellum slave narratives to be discussed in Chapter 4; there are multiple references to authors’ attempt to represent both the “sunshine and shadows” of their lives in slavery.

When African American minstrel troupes presented these scenes of merriment to the public, they never intended for them to represent the slave experience as a whole. Songs and acts located those moments of happiness and celebration within the slave community itself, and absent the surveillance and discipline of a white master, mistress, or overseer. Living under an oppressive institution, the characters nonetheless enjoyed human connections with family and friends and found ways to steal moments of pleasure in the spaces they shared. The available content for these performances often places slave characters in the slave cabin and shared space of the quarters, in groups of slaves working together, in events like weddings and baptisms that slaves celebrated together, and in their secret frolics and religious gatherings.³⁷⁵ The absence of masters and mistresses in the sketches and in many of the songs further supports the idea that these performances did not attempt to represent the *institution* of slavery (as in a happy master-slave relationship, or cheerful performance *for* the master), but the world that some slaves were able to carve out of that system for themselves.³⁷⁶ In some of

³⁷⁵ For examples of references to celebrations and gatherings located within the slave community, see the following: Haverly's Colossal Colored Carnival included a final act entitled "The Darkies' Christmas Jubilee." Christmas was one of the rare occasions when slaves might enjoy a brief respite from work and, as discussed previously, Solomon Northrup wrote specifically about the kind of revelry which might occur over this holiday, in contrast to the rest of the year. See Haverly's Colossal Colored Carnival: Genuine Colored Minstrels, [n.p.], [1880], Folder 429, AMSC. On a playbill for Callender's, the final scene on "The Old Plantation" includes slave characters engaged in "moonlight pastimes," perhaps suggesting the secret frolics which slaves sometimes held after dark. See Callender's Consolidated Colored Minstrels, Howard Athenaeum, February 4, 1884, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. Regarding midnight frolics, see Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 60-92. Many songs specifically reference the "old cabin." The slave cabin was also the center of the action for Len Spencer's Greater New York Minstrels' final act, "In Front of the Old Log Cabin Door." See Len Spencer's Greater New York Minstrels, [n.p.], Season of 1898-1899, playbill, Folder 465, AMSC. For another example, also see Callender's Consolidated Colored Minstrels, Howard Athenaeum, February 4, 1884, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁷⁶ A majority of the minstrel songs I've analyzed contain no reference to a master or mistress. In all of the Callender's playbills I have collected and examined (a total of 49 playbills), the songs and acts contain no reference to a master or mistress in any of the titles, descriptions, or lists of characters.

the songs that do mention a master, the narrator is explicit about the fact that the singing and dancing can only occur after the long day's work, and when the master is away; it is only in that context that slaves can "dance and hab no fear."³⁷⁷ Not representing the master also meant that African American performers did not have to represent slaves being *mastered*. Rather than suggesting slaves' contentment in bondage, the festive scenes that played out on the black minstrel stage showed African Americans laying claim over their own bodies and celebrating their temporary liberation from whites' surveillance and control.³⁷⁸ Whites in the North and South romanticized the antebellum plantation as representing a happier, simpler time, but that life of ease was dependent on the presence of African American slaves to support whites' status and leisure. As it played out on the minstrel stage, African Americans may also have contributed to a romanticized image of the plantation South, but they showed that that romance was only possible for African Americans when the master was gone.

Many scholars have been critical of another common feature of the post-bellum black minstrel show: the "carry-me-back" songs (as in, "Carry me Back to Old

³⁷⁷ For example, in "The Old Home ain't what it used to be," the speaker recalls that "In the fields I've worked when I tho't 'twas hard, / But night bro't its pleasures and rest." African American writer and performer James Bland's song, "In the Evening by the Moonlight," also presented the festivities as only happening at night, after the work day, when "de watch-dog would be sleeping." For other examples, also see the following songs: "Sing, darkies sing!" by Will S. Hays; "Oh, Git Away," in Sam Lucas' Plantation Songster; "The Banjo now hangs silent on the door," by Jerry D. McCarthy; "Hannah boil dat cabbage down," Sam Lucas; Quote in text is from "Oh, Git Away."

³⁷⁸ The idea that these celebratory scenes were not meant to represent slaves' contentment with the institution as a whole is also supported by one final act called "The First of August in Georgia." Specifically referencing the date of emancipation in the British West Indies, this "plantation act" presents blacks' singing and dancing in the context of African American celebrations of emancipation and, in this case, the joy which enslaved men and women feel when freedom reaches this particular Georgia plantation. Callender's Original Georgia Minstrels and Golden Cornet Band, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

Virginia”) in which characters fondly recalled the “old plantation.” On a most basic level, these songs usually took a nostalgic view of the “old plantation home,” recalled the happy times spent there, and expressed a desire to return. Based on a superficial reading and broad generalization, some scholars have argued that the “carry-me-back” songs actually represent the speaker as fondly remembering his life *in slavery*, and even wishing to return to that time and place when he had enjoyed the protection and care of a master. His happy memories of and desire to return to the old plantation are read as a dissatisfaction with and rejection of his life in freedom.³⁷⁹ However, a more careful study of the specific lyrics of these songs makes clear that the characters were expressing a longing and nostalgia for *home* – the place of their birth and the site of their memories – rather than for slavery or a romanticized master-slave relationship. As with the other types of minstrel songs and acts discussed above, many of the “carry-me-back” songs never mention a master or mistress at all.³⁸⁰ Rather, the characters make very specific references to

³⁷⁹ These scholars take this limited view of these songs: Toll, *Blackening Up*; Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 259-270.

³⁸⁰ This is true for many, but not all of the “carry-me-back” songs. It is important to acknowledge that some of these songs do refer to former owners and recall them with fondness. For example, in James Bland’s famous “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia,” the speaker expresses his desire to be buried in the same place as his master and mistress (along with members of his own family), where “we’ll never part no more.” In cases like this, the master-slave relationship is still not the primary focus of the song, which continues to be dominated by those specific references to the southern landscape and memories of family and friends. It is also true that a fond remembrance of the master or mistress at the end of one’s life should not be read as necessarily indicating a fond memory for the institution of slavery. Some slaves did form relationships with and feel ties to the white families that owned them. However, as we know from the antebellum slave narratives, no matter how kind one’s master might be in comparison to others, African Americans still desired to be free. One could express a fondness for individuals within the slave-owning family without expressing any fondness for the institution of slavery itself.

the southern landscape, the cabins where they lived with family, and the happy memories they shared within the slave community.³⁸¹

It is also worthwhile to consider these songs in terms of other scenes of remembrance and reunion in African American representations of slavery after the war. For example, a number of postbellum narratives written by former slaves express a degree of nostalgia for the world the narrator knew as a slave – this is often for the carefree days of childhood, for their family, and for the landscape and dwellings of their former home. In *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, Elizabeth Keckley writes directly and poignantly about this fond remembrance of things past. Keckley is criticized by some friends

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for taking up correspondence with and visiting members of the white family that once owned her and her mother. They cannot imagine how she could forgive them, or want to spend time with them. But Keckley says that it is not these people that matter most, but what they are associated with – everything she lost during slavery and since the war. Keckley's reunion with this family – what some scholars have seen as an impulse toward reconciliation and accommodation – is at least partly born of the lasting legacy of loss she has experienced. She writes, “The past is a mirror that reflects the chief incidents of my life. To surrender it is to surrender the greatest part of my existence -- early impressions, friends, and the graves of my father, my mother, and my son. These people [the white family] are associated with everything that memory holds dear ...” The nostalgic ex-slave songs that played out on the minstrel stage must be read in the same vein, as songs that really express a longing for what mattered to those characters when they lived as slaves; that is not the master, not their labor, not the painful memories of abuse or deprivation, but the strength they took from their family and friends, the moments of pleasure they managed to carve out, and the beauty and stillness of a landscape that could transport them for a moment outside those bounds.

The “old home” which “carry-me-back” songs recalled was grounded in a very particular setting of rivers and magnolias, as lyrics mentioned specific features of the landscape and the spaces which the speaker shared with family members. For example, in the song “Take me home,” the speaker mentions many specific details regarding the landscape, defining the “old home” as “the place where the

orange trees grow” and “the mocking bird sung me to rest ev'ry night.”³⁸² In many of these songs, the narrator’s fondest memories are of his old cabin, the home he once shared with his family.³⁸³ The plantation romance that many Northern whites subscribed to in the post-bellum years often centered on the “Big House,” where master and mistress enjoyed luxury and leisure under the devoted care of the men and women they owned. The “carry-me-back” songs which African American minstrels performed ignored that site of mastery and submission in favor of the private spaces that individuals were able to carve out within the slave quarters. They engaged white audiences’ fantasies by presenting a romanticized image of the southern *landscape*, rather than the master-slave relationship.³⁸⁴

Memories of the slave cabin are connected to family and community – the way that the enslaved played music and sang together in the evenings, images of women preparing food in the cabins, friends visiting from neighboring plantations, children laughing and playing.³⁸⁵ Speakers often identify their former homes as the site of their memories of loved ones – the place where their children were born and their family members are buried. The speaker in “Take Me Home” says that he

³⁸² See “Take Me Home.” Other “carry-me-back” songs that contain specific references to features of the landscape include “Sunny South” and James Bland’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia.”

³⁸³ Most “carry-me-back” songs mention the cabin and the scenes that unfolded in its vicinity. See, for example, “Take Me Home” (discussed above), “Sunny South,” “My Dear Savannah Home,” “Old Uncle Jasper,” and “The Old Log Cabin in the Dell.”

³⁸⁴ Scholar Nina Silber has written about how this romantic image of the South appealed to northerners as much as southerners, as they imagined themselves transported to a simpler, less industrial past. References to the old Southern home and portraits of slavery in general on the stage helped tap into this nostalgia and satisfy whites’ desire to be transported, if only for a moment, to a different world. Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, 66-92.

³⁸⁵ For example, in “Sunny South” the narrator remembers playing and laughing outside the cabin “when in boyhood so careless and free.” In “The Banjo now hangs silent on the door,” the narrator remembers “At evening when the toiling was done, / How the folks used to sing and play the banjo.” Another example is “The Old Home ain’t what it used to be.”

wants to “return to the place of my birth, / Where my children have play'd at the door” and now, many years later, “to the place where my little ones sleep.”³⁸⁶ The songs’ characters are usually speaking from the perspective of old age and desire to return to the old home in order to be close to those they loved (and their memories of them) when they die.³⁸⁷ Swept up in the general nostalgia of the period, white audience members would have related to these songs’ fond remembrance of homes and families left behind on a human and personal level, without necessarily associating that fondness with slavery.³⁸⁸ This would have been especially true for the many migrants and immigrants who occupied the northern cities where black minstrel shows played.³⁸⁹ The way that characters in these songs expressed a longing for the carefree days of youth in an open landscape would also have been appealing to Northern whites who felt the pressures of the modern world and the increasingly constraining nature of the urban environment.

A few of the “carry-me-back” songs explicitly reference slavery and emancipation along with the “old plantation.”³⁹⁰ In “Old Uncle Jasper,” the narrator

³⁸⁶ For additional examples of references to the old home and/or cabin being the place where family members lived, died, and were buried, see the following songs: “I’m a gwine down South,” “Sunny South,” and “The old home ain’t what it used to be.”

³⁸⁷ In the above example of the song “Take Me Home,” the speaker also mentions that the old home is where “Poor massa” is buried, along with the bodies of his “lov’d ones.”

³⁸⁸ This idea is supported by the fact that there were also minstrel songs that dealt with this longing to return home without marking the speaker as African American or associating them with slavery (by virtue of the absence of dialect and any such references in the lyrics). These songs could just as easily have been performed by whites without blackface – and they were. Some of these songs even express a longing for the “old country” and were clearly meant to express the homesickness of immigrants, not former slaves. Examples of such unraced nostalgic songs are “Cot on the Hill” and “Sing me the old songs,” both performed by Callender’s in the 1870s.

³⁸⁹ For more about the wave of nostalgia during this period, see Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Silber, *Romance of Reunion*.

³⁹⁰ Songs that mention emancipation include “My Dear Old Southern Home,” “I’m a-gwine down south,” and “Emancipation Day.”

describes leaving the plantation at the end of the Civil War and travelling in the North and West. Despite his exposure to new places, he still thinks that he “like[s] de land of sugar-cane de best,” joking that the North is so cold that “de water freeze up hill.” He wants to return to the old home at the end of his life and knows his “time is drawing near,” but he nonetheless expresses gratitude that he lived long enough to celebrate the nation’s Centennial and to see Emancipation Day, “De happiest day de colored man e'er knew.” Scholar Sam Dennison argues that songs like this one represented a “belittling of freedom's benefits and life [for African Americans] in sections other than the South.”³⁹¹ Many speakers do describe their current state in negative terms, as they express their desire to return home; the lyrics of various songs mention the characters’ hunger, poverty, and weakness, and sometimes despair regarding how cold it is in the North.³⁹² But in fact, many of these complaints could actually be related to old age; the fact that some songs describe both the narrator and the old plantation as now decrepit and run-down suggests that these changes are related to the passage of time, rather than some failure on the narrator’s part to enjoy freedom. Despite being cold and weary, the speaker in the above song still praises emancipation as the best day he’s ever known. He doesn’t wish to go back in time to live out his life on the plantation; he wants to be buried there. If these songs did sometimes criticize aspects of blacks’ lives in freedom, it seems much more likely that the characters’ downtrodden state could have been a comment on the failure of emancipation to address many of the

³⁹¹ Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 263.

³⁹² For example, see “Sunny South,” “The Old Home ain’t what it used to be,” “I’m a-gwine down South,” and “The Dear Old Home We Loved So Well.”

social, political, and economic needs of freedpeople and the continued racism, discrimination, and limited opportunities they faced. This was a reality that both blacks on the stage and in the audience had to confront in the wake of Reconstruction. If whites did not necessarily “receive” this message, perhaps African American audience members did.

Rather than contributing to an image of former slaves nostalgic for their previous condition, a few of the “carry-me-back” songs actually appealed to white northerners’ desire to see themselves as responsible for emancipation. In one song, the speaker recalls that he left the plantation when “de white folks sot me free.”³⁹³ In another, the speaker also credits white northerners, remembering how things changed when “... de good time's come; / [and] I'se freed by dose Northern men.” He not only characterizes emancipation as a gift bestowed on him by the Union Army, but also appeals to the North’s broader abolitionist legacy when he recalls how, as a child, his mother used to tell him about the Northern men who would one day set them free. Far from expressing a desire to return to slavery, this speaker remembers his former home as the place where he was forcibly sold away from his wife and children. The “Dear Old Southern Home” he wishes to return to is defined by the family which slavery took from him; and when he exclaims that he is “gwine back,” it is to that family (and not his former master or mistress) that he wishes to return.³⁹⁴ Although songs like this obviously ignored African Americans’ vital role

³⁹³ First reference is for “I’m a-gwine down South.”

³⁹⁴ “My Dear Old Southern Home.”

in their own emancipation, they did at least acknowledge some of what they actually experienced in bondage.

Although post-bellum minstrel shows made few explicit references to the Civil War, many African American troupes called up associations with black men's military participation when they performed military acts that called for black performers to appear in uniform.³⁹⁵ There is a tension in this material between comedy and earnestness, as the titles and descriptions of the acts sometimes point to their burlesque nature and, at other times, suggest that they depicted black soldiers' skill, dignity, and honor.³⁹⁶ Of course, comedy could also serve subversive

³⁹⁵ One of the reasons that post-bellum shows made very few references to the Civil War was that it was simply no longer topical as a "current event." Minstrel shows frequently included references to contemporary events, public figures, and other kinds of entertainment, so while it was common for war-time minstrel shows to deal with different aspects of the war, it was unlikely to continue to be a popular subject after 1865. Some examples of post-bellum acts (performed by black minstrel troupes) that referenced the military and/or soldiers include: *Coxey's Army*, *The Georgia Brigadiers*, *The Ginger Blues*, a "Grand Military Pageant" featuring the "Dancing Zouaves," and "Life on the Tented Field." See Callender's *Original Georgia Minstrels*, Fourteenth St. Theatre, [New York City], [May/June 1894], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Famous Georgia Minstrels*, Beethoven Hall, Boston, April 2, 1877, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Georgia Minstrels*, Beethoven Hall, [April 23, 1877], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Original Georgia Minstrels*, [New York], July 15, [no year], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Georgia Minstrels*, Opera House, [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Georgia Minstrels*, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Colossal Colored Minstrel Festival*, Oakland Garden, Boston, 1883, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Consolidated Colored Minstrels*, Howard Athenaeum, January 15, 1883, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Colossal Colored Minstrel Festival*, Oakland Garden, July 31, 1884, n.d., playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Colossal Colored Minstrel Festival*, Oakland Garden, Boston, 1883, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁹⁶ Comedy and burlesque are suggested in the details available for *The Ginger Blues*, which describe the characters in the act's military band in dandified terms. Appearing in uniform, the group is led by "Captain Clam," who is described as "Mighty high in power too, / In de reg'lar army, oh!" The black soldiers have an inflated sense of their position and importance, bragging that they've been given the "post of honor," acting as servants to the high officials attending the Centennial Jubilee celebration. Much as some white representations of the contraband emphasized that they continued to occupy servile roles as freedpeople, these black soldiers sing about guarding their superiors' luggage, polishing their shoes, and giving them a shave. Some other examples of military acts that were comic: *The Brannigan Braves* was described as a "comic Military Burlesque" and appears to include members of the company acting the part of animals. "The Celebration" includes characters with the comically-named characters "Captain Pompus" and "Corporal Longwaist." Need to include specific citation for the details on *Ginger Blues*, but *The Ginger Blues* act is referenced on all these playbills: Callender's *Georgia Minstrels*, Beethoven Hall, [April 23, 1877], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender's *Original Georgia Minstrels*, [New York], July 15, [no year], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC;

purposes, rendering material “safe” for white audiences, while still allowing African American performers to disseminate the powerful image of black men in uniform. These acts often included military drills which showed the skill, discipline and order of the African American soldiers depicted on stage. One reviewer noted that the drill and pageant performed by Callender’s “Black Zouaves” was “everywhere pronounced the most remarkable exposition of military maneuvering without parallel on the stage or in military circles.”³⁹⁷ The performance included a “Dress Parade,” as well as “living battle-field pictures” (most likely tableaux) in which the performers recreated scenes of black soldiers in battle.³⁹⁸

African American minstrel troupes took the powerful image of the black man in uniform to the streets when they put on public parades as part of their shows, with at least part of the troupe marching in uniform and often performing military drills. These troupes provided a powerful image for local African Americans in the towns where they performed, momentarily claiming public space for blacks in uniform. African American minstrel troupes were an example of visible power,

Callender’s Georgia Minstrels, Opera House, [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender’s Georgia Minstrels, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. For Brannigan Braves, see Callender’s Georgia Minstrels, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. For “The Celebration,” see Callender’s Colossal Colored Minstrel Festival, Oakland Garden, Boston, 1883, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; and Haverly’s Genuine Coloured Minstrels and Callender [sic] Colossal, Spectacular, Coloured Minstrels, [n.p.], [n.d.], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁹⁷ In another playbill, the performers in this act are also described as “Presenting an original innovation in Marches, Drills, and Bayonet Exercises without parallel in Military History.” See Callender’s Consolidated Colored Minstrels, Howard Athenaeum, February 4, 1884, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC; Callender’s Minstrels, [n.p.], [March 13, 1885], playbill, Folder 295, AMSC.

³⁹⁸ The playbill identifies the following scenes: “Awaiting the attack,” “Skirmishing,” “The Defense,” “Rally by Four,” “The Charge,” and “The Dying Zouaves.” Callender’s Consolidated Colored Minstrels, Howard Athenaeum, February 4, 1884, playbill, Folder 295, AMSC. Having African Americans appear in these kinds of tableaux also stood in stark contrast to the kinds of “scenes” that blacks were represented in in Uncle Tom shows. Riis writes that, “The most frequently mentioned tableaux featured blacks picking cotton and singing, in their ‘natural state’ as many writers preferred to put it.” See Riis, “The Music and Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” 280.

celebrity, and success. That claiming of public space was even more significant because locals were able to vicariously participate from the sidelines and often saw boys from their own community participating in the parades directly. These parades implicitly celebrated African Americans' change in status and newfound freedoms to congregate, claim public space, and wear uniforms formerly reserved for whites.

Immediately following the Civil War, African American performers laid claim to the once white-dominated minstrel stage by insisting on their racial authority to represent slavery and black characters for the public. Theater scholars' assumption that black minstrels simply reproduced the stereotypes and representations first constructed by whites ignores the significance of this shift and the particular choices which African American minstrel troupes made about the material they represented on stage. Black minstrel troupes negotiated ways to satisfy their audiences' desire for entertainment in the form of comedy, song and dance, and "old plantation scenes" while simultaneously challenging and complicating the image of the faithful, carefree slave that audiences were accustomed to. Often, the content of these shows also challenged the romanticized image of the Old South that was so important to white supremacist and reconciliationist memories of the Civil War – by disrupting ideas about paternalistic master-slave relations, revealing the constant pressure of white surveillance and control which slaves sought relief from, celebrating the freedoms which accompanied emancipation, and implicitly reminding the public what African Americans fought for when *they* donned the U.S. Army uniform 1862-1865. As characters in songs and acts and as professional performers on the public

stage, African American minstrels kept the issue of slavery before the public during an era of historical amnesia and, at the same time, offered a visible reminder of African Americans' change in status since emancipation.

“From the Slave Cabin to the Concert Stage”: The Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company

Minstrelsy was not the only theatrical venue that opened to African American performers post-1865, although it seems likely that their success in that immensely popular format helped open the door for other kinds of performances. The Hyers Sisters Dramatic Co. was one popular African American theater company that took advantage of these new opportunities. Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyers, sisters who first premiered as opera prodigies, were the heart of the company, but worked in conjunction with a number of other African American performers over the years, including the famous minstrel performer, Sam Lucas.³⁹⁹ Built around the singing talent of the sisters, their theater company was at the forefront of presenting musical dramas to the public, a relatively new genre that combined a plot-driven play with frequent musical numbers.⁴⁰⁰ These musical dramas were presented as

³⁹⁹ In her introduction to the *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam* scripts, Eileen Southern states that the vocal quartette was the core of the Hyers Sisters company and included Wallace King and John Luca, in addition to the sisters. Sam Lucas was an important member of the group, as the leading male in these dramas and a big-name draw for audiences. Other musicians, singers, and performers worked with the company over the years. See Eileen Southern, *Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theater*, Vol. 9: *African American Theater: Out of Bondage (1876) and Peculiar Sam*; or, *The Underground Railroad (1879)*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), xiv (hereafter Southern, *African American Theater*).

⁴⁰⁰ Southern describes the plays as in the form of ballad opera, a “genre ... in which the plot unfolds through spoken dialogue interspersed with songs of traditional or popular origin.” Southern, *African American Theater*, xiii.

the main feature of a larger show that included music, dance, and character sketches outside the context of the play. Over the years, the Hyers Sisters managed to stage some of the first all-black theater productions, including two musical dramas that focused specifically on slavery and emancipation: *Out of Bondage* (1876) by Joseph Bradford and *Peculiar Sam; or The Underground Railroad* (1879) by Pauline Hopkins.⁴⁰¹ The hybrid nature of the shows, which combined multiple types of music and performance, served to challenge the racial essentialism of white audiences whose understanding of black performance was often limited to the racist caricatures originally played out on the white minstrel stage. The content and performance of the dramas themselves presented audiences with black-authored representations of slavery and emancipation which engaged with multiple strands of Civil War memory. The Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company was in a unique position to help shape the larger public's understandings and memories of the late war, as they performed these dramas across the country for over a decade (1876-1891), in locations like Chicago, Boston, and Milwaukee, and Los Angeles. A closer examination of their performances reveals the ways that they simultaneously played to and challenged white audiences' expectations, while invoking an

⁴⁰¹ In his discussion of *Out of Bondage* and *The Underground Railroad*, theater scholar Erroll Hill writes that, "Their lyric theater productions focused on the rapid improvement of the race from slavery to freedom or from the slave cabin to the concert stage." Hill notes that the sisters performed the following dramas in addition to those mentioned: *Urlina, the African Princess* (1877); *The Colored Aristocracy* (1877); *The Blackville Twins* (1883); *Plum Pudding* (1887); *Princess of Orelia*; and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1880). See Hill, "The Civil War to the Creole Show," in *A History of African American Theatre*, edited by Erroll G. Hill and James V. Hatch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 77; Hill, "The Hyers Sisters: Pioneers in Black Musical Comedy," in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 120;

emancipationist memory of the war that reached a public beyond the confines of the African American community.⁴⁰²

Musical dramas offered a greater opportunity for expression outside the confines of the minstrel show, although they still faced the burden of needing to accommodate the tastes of their audiences and contained some material from the minstrel stage.⁴⁰³ African American minstrelsy was instrumental in getting white audiences to consider the idea that African Americans might be able to portray African American characters with more accuracy and authenticity.⁴⁰⁴ In its publicity materials, the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, which first presented *Out of Bondage*, informed the public that this was “the greatest dramatic and musical novelty of the centennial year, being the production for the first time in America of a play interpreted entirely by colored artists of the highest talent, and typifying the emergence of the race from slavery to freedom.”⁴⁰⁵ This was particularly significant

⁴⁰² I will explore this in more depth later in the chapter, but it is worth noting that women’s significant role in these theatrical productions provides an opportunity for better understanding African American women’s contribution to Civil War memory in a very public venue – a contribution that included public representations of African American women’s experience of slavery and emancipation.

⁴⁰³ Despite the obvious overlap, press notices for both plays often tried to make a sharp distinction between these musical dramas and the kind of entertainment that could be found on the minstrel stage. In its advertisement for *Out of Bondage*, the Redpath Lyceum Bureau insisted that, “This Company must not be confounded with a ‘minstrel show.’ It is entirely novel in its character, and is a high-class dramatic and musical entertainment, appealing to the most cultivated portion of the community as well as the general amusement seeker. As we make a specialty of handling only the very best material, we can assure our correspondents that this is an entertainment in every way artistic and refined, and is worthy the patronage of the best class of people everywhere.” See reproduction of “Circular of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, Season of 1876-77” in Southern, *African American Theater*, xl.

⁴⁰⁴ One reviewer commented that the cast of *Out of Bondage* was able to authentically represent the “peculiar character and touching pathos” of the slave spirituals which were part of the program. Southern, *African American Theatre*, xl.

⁴⁰⁵ Southern, *African American Theater*, xl. The Hyers Sisters effectively claimed a racial authority to represent African American characters in productions previously dominated by whites. In addition to the all-black casts of *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam*, the Hyers Sisters presented the first production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which “all the colored characters [were] impersonated by colored

for the Hyers Sisters because they helped introduce real black *women* to the stage, offering one of the first theatrical representations of African American women *by* black women (rather than white or black men in drag or white women in blackface). The musical dramas which the sisters starred in challenged audiences to recognize slavery as a subject worthy of the legitimate stage and feel sympathy for African American characters that both engaged with and defied racial stereotypes.

As mentioned previously, *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam* were not presented as stand-alone plays, but rather as part of shows in which the main feature of the scripted drama was accompanied by music, dance, and character sketches outside the context of the play. Song and dance were also important elements throughout the dramas themselves, as characters performed solos, duets, and ensemble pieces, sometimes improvising musical selections in the moment.⁴⁰⁶ African American performer Sam Lucas wrote and performed songs in both plays and, as part of the larger show, his performances sometimes included material that he first made famous on the minstrel stage.⁴⁰⁷ The range of music and material performed in these productions made them hybrid performances, which brought together classical, popular, minstrel, and jubilee music and incorporated song and

people." Harriet Beecher Stowe thought the occasion worthy of special acknowledgement and wrote a prologue to be read before the start of each performance by this company. "Music and Drama," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 10, 1880.

⁴⁰⁶ Southern identifies 19 songs that were scripted to be part of *Out of Bondage* performances, and 20 for *Peculiar Sam*. Southern notes that the company (the group of performers) also helped construct the show when they improvised lines, inserted new songs or replaced planned songs with other ones, and that Sam Lucas did this often. See Southern, *African American Theater*, xxxiii-xxxv, xvi.

⁴⁰⁷ Southern notes that minstrel songs were written specifically for the plays – Sam Lucas wrote "Carve dat Possum" and "Shivering and Shaking Out in the Cold;" African American performer Pete Devonear wrote "Run Home Levi." An advertisement describes Sam Lucas as "the greatest colored character artist in America, who appears in several of his unrivalled specialties." Southern, *African American Theater*, xviii-xix, xl.

dance into politically-charged dramas about slavery and emancipation.⁴⁰⁸ If, as theater scholar Dorothy Chansky argues, “black is as black does,” the hybrid nature of these Hyers Sisters’ productions challenged essentialized notions of blackness and black performance.⁴⁰⁹ Audiences who were now accustomed to seeing African American performers in minstrel shows and jubilee choruses were presented with black performers in serious drama, playing classical music, and singing opera.⁴¹⁰

The Hyers Sisters’ performance of opera within the context of these shows was particularly significant for challenging white audiences’ expectations for black performance, as well as the racist and degrading representations of African American womanhood which the public was most familiar with at that point in time.⁴¹¹ The Sisters were musical prodigies who began singing opera professionally

⁴⁰⁸ Southern describes the variety of music, including minstrel songs and spirituals; talks about actors having to play some stereotypical characters but getting to do so in the context of a play about slavery that challenged some of those stereotypes; and mentions after-piece performances that included character sketches by Lucas. An advertisement describes the end of the show as “Sam Lucas in his great character song, concluding with a grand concert and selections from the operas of ‘Trovatore’ and ‘Ernani.’” See Southern, *African American Theater*, xviii, xx, xxv, and xlii.

⁴⁰⁹ Chansky writes, “In racial terms, then, using performativity as the theory of understanding authenticity, black is as black does, so long as this doing is accepted as authentic by an audience.” Dorothy Chansky, “The Quest for Self in Others: Race, Authenticity, and ‘Folk Plays,’” in *Theatre Symposium: A Publication of the Southeastern Theatre Conference*, vol. 2, *Constructions of Race in Southern Theatre: From Federalism to the Federal Theatre Project*, ed. Noreen Barnes-McClain (Tuscaloosa, AL: Southeastern Theatre Conference and University of Alabama Press, 2003), 13.

⁴¹⁰ Reviews often commented on the juxtaposition of jubilee songs and classical music in the program and were impressed by the Sisters’ ability to perform both with such skill. For example, see Southern, *African American Theater*, xlii.

⁴¹¹ The mammy, the mulatto, and a Topsy-like comic figure were the most popular stage “types” for black female characters at this time. For more on staged representations of black women, see Judith Williams, “Uncle Tom’s Women,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19-39. The Hyers Sisters challenged these degrading representations within the context of the minstrel show itself when they appeared in minstrel shows – “High Class Vocalisms” inserted in the playbill between comic sketches and plantation scenes. Popular dramas were often burlesqued on the minstrel stage, so when the Hyers Sisters appeared in formal dress and performed in earnest, they challenged a very particular image which tended to render comic both the black female character (depicted in drag) and the idea of African American characters singing opera at all.

as children.⁴¹² Although they eventually shifted to theater, they continued to capitalize on their skill and renown as opera singers, performing opera scenes in after-pieces and sometimes within the context of the play itself. African Americans had very few opportunities to professionally perform opera in the nineteenth century; according to one scholar, the idea of a skilled black classical artist in the late nineteenth century U.S. was virtually unheard of.⁴¹³ Prior to the Civil War, Elizabeth Greenfield (billed as the “Black Swan”) enjoyed some acclaim as a classical singer, but despite her natural ability, she was still seen in very racialized terms, viewed as a sensation and novelty, and harshly compared to white opera singers who had enjoyed superior training.⁴¹⁴ The idea and image of a black opera singer was so anomalous that more than one reviewer said it was difficult to judge Greenfield’s voice fairly because they were so turned off by her physical appearance; one reviewer tried to overcome this by averting his gaze during her performance.⁴¹⁵ Sisserita Jones experienced similar challenges in the 1880s and 1890s and was never able to perform in a complete opera because no white opera company would

⁴¹² Eileen Southern, “An Early Black Concert Company: The Hyers Sisters Combination,” in *Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, ed. Richard Crawford, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 20-21, 25-26; James M. Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 160-177; Southern, *African American Theater*, xli.

⁴¹³ Rosalyn M. Story, *And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 1. Eileen Southern also comments that what was notable about the Hyers Sisters Company was “that it consisted of black artists singing operatic music in a period when white America ostensibly would accept black entertainers on the stage only as Ethiopian minstrels or student singers of plantation songs.” Southern, “An Early Black Concert Company,” 23.

⁴¹⁴ Story, *And So I Sing*, 21-28.

⁴¹⁵ In her discussion of Elizabeth Greenfield, Rosalyn Story says that “For white music patrons in the early nineteenth century, the very idea of a refined voice emerging from an African-looking woman evoked a myriad of reactions, from amazement to amusement.” Story, *And So I Sing*, 21, 24-25.

accept her.⁴¹⁶ The Hyers Sisters' created their own venue when they formed their own theater company, providing themselves with a context for continuing to showcase their operatic talents and creating opportunities for other black female performers as well.⁴¹⁷

The Sisters' performance of opera created a very refined image of black women who were capable of embodying romantic and tragic characters and artistically communicating strong emotion. The Sisters performed scenes from composers like Verdi, Rossini, and Donizetti; most often, they performed selections from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* in particular.⁴¹⁸ Throughout their careers, reviewers commented on the Sisters' beauty and refinement, as well as their artistic skill.⁴¹⁹ Various writers described them as "ladylike," "graceful," "lovely, [and] attractive,"

⁴¹⁶ According to music scholar Rosalyn Story, before Marion Anderson in the 1950s, black artists weren't allowed to be part of major opera companies; rather, they "were forced to restrict their careers to black companies, European houses, and the American concert stage." Sisserita Jones never performed in a complete opera (Story, 3-4) and had to perform scenes from several operas with the assistance of an ensemble of singers, orchestra, and chorus. Jones felt she wouldn't be hired to sing certain parts or perform in certain operas because of her race. Marie Selika (1849-1937), who made her professional debut in 1876, was also relegated to only performing scenes, rather than complete operas. In discussing the minstrel show, scholar Carol Allen says that brief snippets that ran into each other and were unrelated suggested to the audience that "bona fide black folk, as represented by the minstrels, stumble and stagger because they have difficulty thinking in straight patterns." The overlap of dialogue, singing, instrumental music, and skits served to "regularize the conception that black culture is discernable in its incoherence; even its jocularly can be reproduced and mastered." One wonders if African American women singers' having to perform individual scenes from several different operas might have made a similar impression on audiences, suggested those black performers' inability to sustain a full production. See Story, *And So I Sing*, xiv-xv, 3-4, 14, 28-29; Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 49.

⁴¹⁷ The Hyers Sisters had starring roles in *Out of Bondage* and *The Underground Railroad*, but these plays included other significant roles for women. In addition, there are multiple references to the wives of male performers being part of certain shows. Tom McIntosh performed with his wife, Hattie, in the shows' afterpiece and Sam Lucas's wife performed on the violin. "Tribute to Tom M'Intosh: Sketch of His Stage Career by Sylvester Russell," *The Freeman*, April 9, 1904; "Gem City News," *Cleveland Gazette*, Sept. 4, 1886; "The Hyer Sisters' Combination," *Cleveland Gazette*, Nov. 13, 1886.

⁴¹⁸ Hill, "The Hyers Sisters: Pioneers in Black Musical Comedy," 119.

⁴¹⁹ For an example of comments on the Hyers Sisters' musical skill, see: "Music and the Drama: 'Out of Bondage' at the Boston Theatre," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 21, 1877.

and possessing “a dignity of manner that makes itself felt.”⁴²⁰ One writer, whose review was included in the Hyers Sisters promotional material, commented on the Sisters’ versatility, able to perform the jubilee songs with authenticity, while also showing themselves skilled at classical music traditionally associated with white performers. “The rendering of these quaint melodies [plantation and jubilee songs] was marked by a beauty, richness, and weird fascination indescribable, and which we have never heard equalled [sic] by another troupe.” The review goes on to say that the second part of the performance

introduce[s] a higher order of music, -- American character songs, operatic selections, quartettes, etc. ... and showed that the troupe, in voice and culture, could compare with any of their white brethren and sisters in the successful rendition of the best and most difficult music. We are particularly struck with the thought that while white vocalists have attempted in vain to render naturally the jubilee songs of the South, this colored troupe not only gave them with all the humor and pathos of the blacks, but also challenged the white race in their artistic execution of the higher class of music.⁴²¹

This reviewer’s reaction speaks to the ways in which these musical dramas could engage with white expectations for African American performance, while also challenging those expectations in other ways. The above writer, along with many others, implicitly suggests that the Hyers Sisters are able to perform the jubilee songs with such feeling because of a racial authenticity; apparently their very blackness made up for the fact that the sisters had never lived on a plantation and were born in New York and California post-emancipation. At the same time, as

⁴²⁰ Dress and poise were important for concert artists – Elizabeth Greenfield was often criticized as lacking this. See Story, *And So I Sing*, 26. “Callender’s Minstrel Festival,” *New York Globe*, June 16, 1883; “The Hyers Sisters,” *The Elevator* (San Francisco, California), June 28, 1873; Southern, *African American Theater*, xli.

⁴²¹ Southern, *African American Theatre*, xlii.

scholar Barbara L. Webb argues for another group of African American prima donnas, their performance of opera “argued for extending the province of African American identity beyond the [imagined] plantation.”⁴²² Performing Verdi in Italian required enough knowledge of a foreign language to understand and communicate the depth of feeling behind the words being sung; although audiences could enjoy opera without necessarily understanding the language, the presupposition that they would be adequately versed in a foreign language also spoke to the level of refinement expected of opera viewers. Opera was usually performed in grander venues, which might call for fancy dress to attend.⁴²³ It sometimes presumed wealth on the part of the singer – a family wealthy enough to leave her at her leisure to study music, to pay for her to train at musical schools or with particular artists. The Hyers Sisters’ performance of opera in the same shows where they acted the part of slaves effectively knocked the pedestal of whiteness and wealth out from under the image of the opera singer and challenged audiences to see African Americans in new ways.

⁴²² Barbara L. Webb, “Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 1 (March 2004), 78. Webb makes this argument regarding the black prima donnas in the African American show *Black America*. Like the Hyers Sisters, their performances included both traditional jubilee songs and classical music that would not typically be associated with the plantation setting of the show.

⁴²³ In thinking about costuming and what the Singers may have looked like, especially when performing opera outside of the plays, it is worthwhile to mention that in the nineteenth century, elegant dress marked a woman’s class and status because of its cost and its suggestion of leisure. On some level, isn’t it also challenging former sumptuary laws that had applied to slaves – laws that “denied slaves the right to wear clothing that appropriated the status of free whites,” or in the West Indies, denying free black women the right to wear “extravagant clothes surpassing those of white women.” Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women’s Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-Century America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 10-11.

The variety of material which was part of these shows could satisfy audiences that were increasingly drawn to the Variety Show and wanted to see entertainments that engaged them with a diversity of performances. In its Circular, the Lyceum Bureau boasted that the play

was so pleasing to all classes of amusement seekers, having sufficient fun to entertain those who like best to laugh, enough of incident to make it interesting to those who enjoy the story, and music of a quality to satisfy every taste. ... The plot is ingenious, the situations effective, and the music comprises plantation, jubilee, and slave songs, sung as they never have been sung in this country, together with a higher order of music, which is beautifully rendered and intelligently interpreted.⁴²⁴

But the choices which the Singers made about *what* to present were important – they satisfied their audiences’ desire for variety by combining plays about slavery and emancipation with dance, comic sketches, and a variety of music that included jubilee songs as well as songs by classic composers. Uncle Tom shows of the day satisfied audiences’ desire for spectacle with scenes of Eliza being chased by bloodhounds; the Hyers Sisters did it by hiring masses of local blacks to depict Sherman’s March (and African Americans’ flight from slavery) in the second act of *Out of Bondage*.⁴²⁵ All of this stands as a backdrop for the more specific work of representing slavery and emancipation in the two plays discussed below.

⁴²⁴ Southern, *African American Theater*, xli.

⁴²⁵ Southern, *African American Theater*, xx. A number of scholars have focused on how Pauline Hopkins, in particular, as the author of *The Underground Railroad*, balanced the need to satisfy some audience expectations and desires, while challenging them in other ways. Hopkins relied on some elements of the minstrel show model and expectations for popular entertainment – comedy, song and dance, use of dialect and stage spectacle – in order to engage a white audience on the more serious subject of slavery and emancipation and present characters that cannot be contained by stock racial “types.” While Hopkins certainly deserves a great deal of credit for what she accomplished in the script and the vision of the play that she carried out in its productions, I would carry this argument further to suggest that the Hyers Sisters’ dramatic company engaged in similar work when it staged productions of *Underground Railroad* and *Out of Bondage* and placed them in the

Two of the musical dramas the Hyers Sisters performed in the 1870s-1890s engaged explicitly with memories of the Civil War and the longer struggle for African American freedom. Performed in northern cities and geared toward northern audiences, these musical dramas did not fit neatly into a single strand of Civil War memory, but rather engaged with multiple and overlapping narratives about the war, emancipation, and the prospects for national reunion. Both plays were more or less explicitly telling a Unionist and emancipationist story about the war which celebrated emancipation as a positive good, but they also accommodated the cultural shift toward reconciliation in a number of ways. One could pay homage to the end of slavery without vilifying all white southerners, or all white slave owners. Even if this narrative was sometimes compromised, it nonetheless allowed a small company of African American performers to present theatrical material about slavery and freedom to thousands of whites during an era marked by the white North's romanticization of the "Old South" and historical amnesia regarding the realities of that world. The Hyers Sisters' Dramatic Co. effectively kept the history of slavery, the victory and promises of emancipation, and the changing status of African Americans in the public eye into the 1890s and did so through a medium that allowed them to reach a significant audience.

context of these larger shows – conceding to some expectations, while challenging others. For more on how scholars have explored Hopkins' own negotiation of expectations, see Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 31-33, 39, 47; Hanna Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 33, 36, 38; Lois Brown, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 116-136.

Out of Bondage was the first of these dramas to be written and performed.⁴²⁶

After taking over management of the Hyers Sisters Co., the Boston Lyceum commissioned a play with the African American drama company specifically in mind; they wanted to present a story that would “show the progress of the race since freedom.” Interestingly, the white playwright they hired for this task was originally from a slave-owning family in Tennessee. Joseph Bradford had been living in Boston for many years and was a popular writer for the stage, but it is difficult to ignore his origins when we consider that he was being asked to write about the Union victory, emancipation, and African American progress.⁴²⁷ The play

⁴²⁶ A newspaper search reveals reviews and notices of the play’s performance around the country, 1877-1891. The play appeared in Illinois, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Maine, Colorado, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and California, with repeated performances over the years in the major cities of Chicago, Milwaukee, and San Francisco. See the following references and reviews, organized by location. **California:** “Amusements,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA), March 17, 1879; “The Stage,” *The Freeman*, February 22, 1890; “Classifieds,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1890; “Amusements,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1890. **Colorado:** “Music and the Drama,” *Daily Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), February 2, 1879. **Illinois:** “Amusements: The ‘Out-of-Bondage’ Troupe,” *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), May 5, 1877; “Amusements: Out of Bondage,” *Inter Ocean*, May 7, 1877; “Amusements: ‘Out of Bondage,’” *Inter Ocean*, May 10, 1877; “Advertisements,” *Inter Ocean*, May 11, 1877; “Amusements: The ‘Out of Bondage’ Troupe,” *Inter Ocean*, May 11, 1877; “Out of Bondage,” *Inter Ocean*, May 12, 1877; “Amusements: ‘Out of Bondage,’” *Inter Ocean*, May 12, 1877; “Dramatic: The New Chicago,” *Inter Ocean*, February 26, 1878; “Dramatic and Musical,” *Inter Ocean*, March 2, 1878; “The Olympic,” *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), March 18, 1882; “General Mention,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, March 20, 1882. **Kansas:** *The Globe* (Atchison, KS), September 1, 1879. **Missouri:** “Classifieds,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), October 7, 1879. **Maine:** “Local Matters,” *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, June 18, 1878. **Massachusetts:** “Music and Drama,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 20, 1877; “Music and the Drama: ‘Out of Bondage’ at the Boston Theatre,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 21, 1877; “Music and the Drama: The Theatres,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 24, 1877. **New York:** “Items of the Age,” *New York Age* (New York, New York), February 1, 1890. **Ohio:** “Findlay,” *Cleveland Gazette*, September 4, 1886; “Gem City News,” *Cleveland Gazette*, September 4, 1886; “The Hyer Sisters’ Combination,” *Cleveland Gazette*, November 13, 1886; “Doings of the Race,” *Cleveland Gazette*, January 22, 1887. **Pennsylvania:** “Dramatic and Musical: The Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas,” *The North American*, January 27, 1880. **Wisconsin:** “Amusements: The Hyers Sisters,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), September 29, 1877; “The Theatre,” *The Daily Republican-Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), July 2, 1882; “Amusements,” *The Daily Republican-Sentinel*, July 4, 1882; “Amusement Bulletin,” *Milwaukee Daily Journal* (Milwaukee, WI), December 20, 1886; “Ready to Begin,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), June 8, 1890; “Dramatic Gossip,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 15, 1890. There is also a reference to the show’s success in “the East”: “Stage Notes,” *Topeka Call* (Topeka, Kansas), October 18, 1891.

⁴²⁷ Bradford served in the Union Navy during the Civil War. Southern, *African American Theater*, xiv, xvi.

is set during and after the Civil War, although the first scene, which takes place in the cabin of an enslaved family, gives no hint of the war and could seemingly have taken place at any time in the antebellum era. The first scene introduces the main characters of the play, all African American: Uncle Eph, Aunt Naomi, Narcisse, Kaloolah, Prince, Henry, and Little Jim. We see the family enjoying each other's company after the day's work, eating, drinking, joking, singing, and dancing together. In the second scene, the family is confronted with the prospect of freedom when they learn that the Union Army is marching through their territory. All are happy for freedom, but they have different expectations and concerns regarding what exactly it will mean. The adult children envision a fairly dramatic change in which they will be able to enjoy the leisure that they have always seen free whites have. They are anxious to leave the plantation and go north, where they hope new opportunities await. The elderly parents are less certain about what freedom will mean for those who are too old to work 40 acres of land, or too fearful to trade the world they know for an uncertain future in the strange land of the North. The parents remain behind on the plantation, while their adult children join up with a group of freedpeople heading north. The final scene takes place approximately five years after the war's end and depicts the reunion of the family, as the older generation finally comes north and finds their children quite changed. The adult children are now finely dressed and speak without dialect; they are living in a respectable home and have found work singing spirituals for a white church. They welcome their parents into their home and assure them that the North is a place of opportunity and racial egalitarianism. The plot and script were provided for them,

but the Hyers Sisters and the rest of the company embodied these characters and this story on stage – it was they who ultimately represented this vision of slavery, emancipation, and black progress for their audiences.⁴²⁸

Out of Bondage would have appealed to white northerners who were still working out the meanings of the late war. Although they initially had a very Unionist or pro-Union understanding of the war, by the later 1870s they increasingly moved toward a narrative that focused on the reconciliation of the two regions. Bradford's play spoke to an audience that wanted to claim responsibility for ending slavery and honor the valor of the Union army, without stirring up too many old tensions with the South. The Boston Lyceum's special commission of such a play suggests that they may have been actively trying to construct a memory of the Civil War which was palatable to Northerners' shifting views. Historians' tendency to speak in the broad terms of reconciliation, white supremacy, and emancipation as the primary memories of the war to emerge, fails to take into account the nuances and the way that some representations of slavery and the war could accommodate multiple narratives at once.

Out of Bondage satisfied the North's desire to create a legacy of virtue by portraying northerners as opposed to the institution of slavery and responsible for

⁴²⁸ Southern notes that the performers played a role in constructing the show when they improvised lines, inserted new songs, or replaced a planned song with another. Speaking to the way that performers could embody scripted stereotypes in a way that also pushed beyond them, Southern writes that the "black musicians succeed in re-creating plantation types in conformance with stereotypes established in contemporaneous literature and drama about slavery, while, at the same time, giving their characters an innate dignity that demands respect for black culture." See Southern, *African American Theater*, xvi, xx.

eradicating that great evil from the nation.⁴²⁹ Descriptions of the play that appear in the press show the way it presented the North as responsible for emancipation and called up its abolitionist history. One press notice described African Americans as being “released from the curse of slavery and made free” with “the approach of the Union armies.”⁴³⁰ Indeed, in the plot of the play, it is the presence of the Union Army that frees the enslaved characters and that gives the younger generation the opportunity to leave the old plantation and venture north. Although Uncle Eph and Aunt Naomi initially choose to remain on the plantation, later we learn that they joined Sherman’s March to the Sea. Their freedom of movement and eventual decision to join their children in Boston is also made possible by the Union army. When the family is reconstituted in Boston several years after emancipation, Narcisse credits white northerners with ending slavery quite explicitly, reminding the family that they must “always remember the debt of gratitude we owe the white people. ... Let us always remember that any way to freedom lay through the red sea of their blood, which was poured out for us like water.”⁴³¹ The former slaves depicted in this northern scene express gratitude for the sacrifices made by northern whites, surely a message which would have been appreciated by a northern white audience – and also one which, by painting the North as the great emancipator, made slavery a distinctly Southern crime. This is a very particular

⁴²⁹ The phrase “legacy of virtue” plays on the language of Robert Penn Warren, who reflected on the “symbolic value of the war” at the time of its centennial anniversary in 1961. Warren argued that the “Treasury of Virtue” which the North claimed as its Civil War legacy recast the “war to restore the Union” as “a consciously undertaken crusade” to end slavery, “so full of righteousness” that all past and future transgressions must be forgiven. See Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), vii, 64, 59-66.

⁴³⁰ Southern, *African American Theater*, xlii.

⁴³¹ Southern, *African American Theater*, 49.

view of emancipation that ignores the many actions which enslaved people took to free themselves and their families over the course of the war, as well as African Americans' contributions to the war effort as laborers and soldiers. White northerners could participate in a public memory of the war that valued emancipation without acknowledging African Americans' participation in that process.

The play's focus on a single family's transition to freedom presents emancipation as the most important result of the war, and in so doing may have suggested that the abolition of slavery was an accepted Union war aim from the beginning. Painting the North as the great emancipator reinforces the idea that slavery (and its attendant racism) was a distinctly Southern crime, allowing the white North to continue to ignore its own history of slavery and servitude. The adult children end up in Boston, a former abolitionist stronghold that would likely have called up associations with the North's antislavery history. Although the play acknowledges that some former slaves migrated north after the war, this isn't presented as a problem white northerners need to trouble themselves over because we are only talking about one family – whites are the only northerners the children mention interacting with – and, as professional singers, they are an allowed exception to the rule. White northerners did not want African Americans to share their seat on the streetcar, but they were perfectly comfortable being entertained by them. At the same time, the fact that they show this family in the North means that the play does not have to deal with the results of emancipation in the South, or engage with the disenfranchisement and violence that were becoming increasingly

common by the 1870s. Downplaying problems with Reconstruction also lent itself to reconciliation because it avoided a potentially divisive issue for the two regions.

The younger generation describes the North as an egalitarian and color-blind society where everyone has the same rights. At the same time that the actual Hyers Sisters and the Fisk Jubilee Singers were being turned out of northern hotels on account of their race, the characters in *Out of Bondage* explain to their parents that there is no discrimination in the North and they perform their music at an integrated church.⁴³² Narcisse invites Uncle Eph and Aunt Naomi to attend one of their concerts. Despite their protests, she assures them that they can sit with the rest of the audience, for “u[p] North here there is no distinction of color, all men are free and equal.” “And one man is jis as good as anoder?,” Uncle Eph asks. “Yes, indeed, and a heap better if he behaves himself,” says Kaloolah.⁴³³ This presents the North as color blind in comparison to the South and a land where equality can be realized. At the same time, Kaloolah’s remark suggests that equality is only earned through good behavior, perhaps another nod to white audiences that African Americans recognized their debt and the expectation of continued deference. The final scene’s portrayal of northern attitudes about race allowed the North to ignore the consequences of emancipation in their own region, African Americans’ ongoing struggles with public discrimination, and the battle for political rights.⁴³⁴

⁴³² The Jubilee Singers’ experiences of discrimination are examined in detail in the next section of the chapter. For a reference to the Hyers Sisters experiencing discrimination, see: “Indianapolis Special to Cincinnati Gazette. Civil Rights at Indianapolis.-----A Company of Respectable Colored People Denied Hotel Accommodations.-----,” *Christian Recorder*, September 13, 1877.

⁴³³ Southern, *African American Theater*, 60.

⁴³⁴ For more about emancipation, Reconstruction, and the fight for black rights in the postbellum North, see, for example: Schwalm, *Emancipation’s Diaspora*; Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black*

Despite its lauding of the North, the play still does its best to not alienate white southerners completely. No members of either army appear in the play, nor do we hear about any specific battles. The audience does not have to *relive* the conflict, so to speak. The only direct representation of the military we see is the scene when Kaloolah and Jim “play” at being soldiers after they dress in their former master’s discarded uniforms. Described as tattered and from some almost ancient time/battle, the uniforms are further depoliticized because 1) they are not Union or Confederate uniforms, and 2) they are from a much older conflict, now long forgotten – just like the Civil War was becoming a battle from long ago represented in army relics.⁴³⁵ The play does offer a critique of slavery, but it does so without vilifying the slave owner. The white master or mistress are spoken about, but never personified on stage – the audience never has to confront the image of a white slave owner abusing their power. Here we have an image of freedom that comes easily and without conflict, that credits the North with emancipation, and that remains silent on African Americans’ participation in the war and their own emancipation.

Although Bradford’s play did not take a particularly radical approach to its representation of the late war, a closer reading of the text shows that the performances still made subtle criticisms of slavery, Reconstruction, and racism in the North. The opening scene of the play finds the enslaved family sharing dinner in

Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860-1910 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997); Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom*.

⁴³⁵ The scene description says that Prince and Kaloolah “are grotesquely attired in old fashioned military costume. Prince has on an Enormously high bearskin [?] carries a flint-lock musket and wears an exceedingly long-tailed military coat. Kaloolah has on a becoming [?]-jacket and [bottom line of text cuts off and illegible] ... and [?] She has a drum suspended from her neck, on which she beats time as she and Prince march on. ...” Southern, *African American Theater*, 34-37.

their cabin. The children are returning from a long day's labor in the field, they are met on the way by the light-skinned and refined sister (Narcisse) who lives and works at the big house, and they share a cooked possum for dinner.⁴³⁶ Kaloolah describes herself as exhausted from work and very hungry because she has had nothing to eat since breakfast that morning.⁴³⁷ Everyone is hungry and they have only a single possum to share between seven people; it's unlikely that possums were issued as part of the rations masters provided to slaves, so we know that they must either supplement their diet by hunting and trapping animals, or go hungry.⁴³⁸ There is even less to go around because Narcisse joins them; although we do not know the circumstances, we know that members of this family have been separated in order to fulfill the needs and wants of their masters.⁴³⁹ Although the white family is never depicted, their dedication to their slaves is challenged when we learn that they've fled their plantation without making any provisions for their slaves, or "family." Even Narcisse, the light-skinned and favored daughter who works in the big house, is left behind.⁴⁴⁰

Uncle Eph's reluctance, throughout the play, to believe in some of the promises of freedom exposes the limits of the Northern plan for Reconstruction, its

⁴³⁶ Aunt Chloe has prepared dinner and the children are running late. She suggests that they may have stopped to pick blackberries on their way back from the field and Uncle Eph says they should be satisfied with picking cotton 12-15 hours a day. We learn in the same scene that Narcisse runs into the children on the way from the big house, where she lives with the white folks. Southern, *African American Theater*, 5, 7-8.

⁴³⁷ Southern, *African American Theater*, 12-13.

⁴³⁸ The process of dividing the possum up based on "scientific principles" is a moment of comedy, but also stressed how little food there was to go around. Kaloolah ends up not getting any and has to settle for the tail. Southern, *African American Theater*, 14, 16-17.

⁴³⁹ Southern, *African American Theater*, 7-8, 26-27.

⁴⁴⁰ Southern, *African American Theater*, 30-32.

failure to address the real needs and circumstances of many freedpeople, and the persistence of social inequalities in both regions post-emancipation. Although everyone is very happy to be free, Uncle Eph expresses some doubt about exactly what freedom means. He has heard the rumors about each family receiving 40 acres and a mule, but he wonders what good that would do him and his wife when they are too old to work that much land.⁴⁴¹ Uncle Eph wants to stay on the plantation, where he hopes they will be provided for, but the fact that the old couple follows Sherman's March shortly thereafter suggests that that arrangement did not work out.⁴⁴² In the final scene, Uncle Eph's surprise and doubt about whether Northern society is really so equal may be a subtle reminder that, even five years after emancipation, he cannot count on equal rights in the South.⁴⁴³

Although white northerners are given credit for freeing the slaves, it's still important to acknowledge that the play does portray emancipation as a positive good. The characters repeatedly express their desire for freedom and are overjoyed when Union troops pass through their area, leaving freedom behind.⁴⁴⁴ The children initially have grandiose ideas of what their lives will be like in the North, in freedom. Some audience members may have interpreted Kaloolah's exclamation about never having to work and being waited on as evidence of African Americans'

⁴⁴¹ Southern, *African American Theater*, 24-25, 32

⁴⁴² Southern, *African American Theater*, 48.

⁴⁴³ Southern, *African American Theater*, 60.

⁴⁴⁴ In Scene 1, Uncle Eph offers a toast before dinner, saying, "Here's hopin' you may all lib to see youselves free!" In Scene 2, when Uncle Eph tells Aunt Naomi that that the Yankees are coming and that they plan "to drive de white folks off de face ob de earth; an' den dey's gwine to gibe de cullud people de land an' de pervisions," Aunt Naomi says, "Den bully fur de Yankees!" Kaloolah says she is so excited because, "Why de Yankees is comin' an we's all gwine to be free. Hooray!" Prince responds, "Yes, an' we's all gwine to go Nort', Hooray!" Southern, *African American Theater*, 13, 24-25, 28.

ignorance and laziness. But another reading suggests that she equates freedom with whiteness and thus expects that freedom will mean she gets to enjoy the same privileges as her master and mistress – who do no work and are waited on.⁴⁴⁵ Ultimately the children learn that they do have to work in freedom, but they seem to value and accept that lesson.⁴⁴⁶ The script also shows that former slaves are capable of uplifting and improving themselves. The final scene in the North shows the children utterly transformed, suggesting just how possible change is in a different environment.⁴⁴⁷ A review of an 1890 performance noted how changed the younger generation appeared in the final scene:

The third act shows the same people in the North, where they have evidently obtained a competency, for they are no longer attired in old plantation costumes, but have blossomed into full evening dress of gorgeous style, and have acquired haughty manners and a severely correct deportment.⁴⁴⁸

Uncle Eph almost doesn't recognize them when they first reunite, not only because of their fine clothes and bearing, but also because of their dialect-free speech. Even Kaloolah, the most unruly of the children and the one who rejected the idea of being "schooled," speaks "proper" English at play's end.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁵ Prince says he will eat an entire fat possum every day, he won't work anymore, and he'll never get out of bed before sunup. Kaloolah says she will live by herself in the big house and have the white people wait on her. Southern, *African American Theater*, 29.

⁴⁴⁶ Southern, *African American Theater*, 51-52.

⁴⁴⁷ The Redpath Lyceum Bureau highlighted this in its advertisement of the show, wherein the final act or scene was described as presenting the younger generation as "Educated and happy. Free and prosperous." Southern, *African American Theater*, xl.

⁴⁴⁸ "Amusements," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), February 21, 1890.

⁴⁴⁹ Southern, *African American Theater*, 44-47.

Pauline Hopkins' *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* was written and performed a few years after Bradford's play.⁴⁵⁰ Hopkins, an African American born free in the North on the eve of the Civil War, wrote *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* in 1879 and the play was performed by the Hyers Sisters' troupe under that title 1879-1880.⁴⁵¹ It may be helpful to think of *The Underground Railroad* as a kind of response to the earlier work by Bradford. Although the plays share certain elements, the authors approached the subject differently and one imagines that Hopkins' race has something to do with how she wanted to portray other African Americans. Just as she was, on some level, in conversation with staged versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she was also issuing a kind of reply to the earlier work by Bradford.⁴⁵² It also seems quite possible that Hopkins may have been influenced by the publication and popularity of William Still's *The Underground*

⁴⁵⁰ Pauline E. Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* (1879), reprinted in *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938*, ed. Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1991), 100-123.

⁴⁵¹ *Peculiar Sam* enjoyed a much shorter run than Bradford's *Out of Bondage*, occupying the stage for less than two years. There is conflicting data about the play's performance history, some suggesting that it first premiered in December 1878, and others suggesting that it was not performed until 1879; the last performances of the play, as a Hyers Sisters company production, took place in 1880. Pauline Hopkins staged and performed the play with her own company 1880-1885. Despite *The Underground Railroad's* relatively short run under the direction of the Hyers Sisters, the play was performed by three different theater groups and played across the country, suggesting that it enjoyed a wide audience during its time. The different performance histories of the two plays will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. For other scholars' accounts of *Peculiar Sam's* performance history, see Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins*, 33-36; Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 36; Martha Patterson, "Remaking the Minstrel: Pauline Hopkins's *Peculiar Sam* and the Post-Reconstruction Black Subject," in *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage*, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 13; Southern, *African American Theater*, xxiv-xxv, xli. My own newspaper search for the play's performance by the Hyers Sisters gives the following dates of performance, 1879-1880: "Amusements: The Underground Railroad," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, April 1, 1879; "Music and the Drama: Colored Drama at Oakland," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 6, 1880.

⁴⁵² Wallinger notes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a kind of master text, frequently borrowed from and adapted, for Hopkins' generation of writers. Wallinger and Lois Brown also note that William Wells Browns' *The Escape* was also a model for Hopkins' work – she met Brown as a girl, read and studied his work, and there are plot connections between the plays. See Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins*, 19-20, 34, 41; Brown, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins*, 117.

Railroad in 1872.⁴⁵³ The topic of the Underground Railroad and fugitive slaves was one which continued to hold popular interest post-war, but Still's collection of testimony from thousands of former slaves who had escaped slavery of their own volition prior to and during the Civil War returned an emphasis to the agency of slaves in their own emancipation, as well as the important role of African Americans in the larger network that provided aid to fugitives. At the very least, the title of Hopkins' play, along with its emphasis on the self-emancipation of an enslaved family during the antebellum era, suggests that Hopkins, like Still, was committed to telling a story about freedom that emphasized the actions which African Americans took to free themselves.⁴⁵⁴

The Underground Railroad shows us life before and after the Civil War, and before and after freedom. But in this drama, freedom is gained when the entire family runs away together and this is precipitated not by the coincidence of the war but by the abusive treatment of their owners. Much less about the antics and tomfoolery that we saw in the opening act of Bradford's play, the opening scene of the *Underground Railroad* introduces the conflict that precipitates their flight. The main character, Sam (played by Sam Lucas), learns that Virginia, the woman he loves, has been married against her will to the overseer, by the owners. Virginia is shamed and mortified because it puts her in a difficult moral position, since she is now expected to fulfill the obligations of marriage even though she did not choose her

⁴⁵³ Still, *Underground Railroad*.

⁴⁵⁴Scholar Julie Roy Jeffrey writes about the significant differences in William Still's representation of the Underground Railroad and those constructed by white abolitionists, who often placed themselves at the center of the story and rendered African Americans in passive terms. See Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember: Antislavery Autobiographies and the Unfinished Work of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008).

partner or give her consent.⁴⁵⁵ Sam is furious that something has come between them and that their owners chose to exercise this arbitrary power. Possessing a knowledge, partly through his mother, of antislavery activity and a network of people who help blacks escape to the North, Sam determines that the only solution is for the entire family to run away. The second scene is the most comic, as the family makes their escape and Sam has to play trickster for his pursuers in order to get everyone away safely. Of particular interest here is that the person they meet on the Underground Railroad is another African American, thus presenting blacks rather than whites as the primary actors in the Underground Railroad. In the final act, the family is living in Canada after the war and Sam has been elected to the Senate in Ohio. The former overseer tracks them down in order to let Virginia know that she's no longer bound to him as a wife because he has already married and had children with another. With this obstacle out of the way, Sam and Virginia are able to come together not only out of harm's way but also in a proper Christian ceremony.

Hopkins' play shares some of the Unionist and reconciliationist elements in *Out of Bondage*, but overall presents a more emancipationist memory of the Civil War and its causes. Significantly, it is the African American characters who seek and achieve freedom for themselves in this production. They do so using the "underground railroad" and, although no white involvement is mentioned at any

⁴⁵⁵ Wallinger notes that "Hopkins decentered the tragic mulatto plot and envisioned new roles for her heroines." Although certain elements of tragedy shape Virginia's story, she is far from passive and the plot takes its turn partly because she comes to tell everyone that she plans to run away rather than accept this forced marriage to the overseer. Carol Allen is the one who says that Hopkins' "types" don't fit the typical type - "her house wench becomes a spirited refugee, who would rather escape than accept a forced marriage." Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins*, 10, 39; Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 32.

stage in their escape, the phrase would have connected with some white northerners' abolitionist history and with their shared memory of the North as a place of resistance to slavery and the harbinger of emancipation following the Civil War. Although passing reference is made to the Civil War, the action of the play is set several years before the war and shortly after. The fact that *The Underground Railroad* looks back to an earlier time, in the 1850s, would have helped to depoliticize the memory of emancipation to some degree. The war is mentioned briefly, but the play is not set during that conflict; as in *Out of Bondage*, the audience does not have to see or hear about the war by having it recreated or even re-narrated for them on stage. This family freed themselves, but in terms of the Civil War, universal emancipation is simply referenced as something that happened at the end of the war – not identified as the cause of the rebellion or as something either side was fighting over. Yet another step is taken away from that conflict because the family is relocated in Canada – freedom is now divorced from the U.S. altogether. Once again, the audience doesn't have to confront the consequences of emancipation in either region. As in Bradford's play, the slave owner is never embodied on stage, further depoliticizing the conflict by not creating an explicit representation of the "evil" southern slave owner.

Although it doesn't represent the Civil War itself, Hopkins' play implicitly nods its head to an emancipationist memory of the war in which African Americans fought for their own freedom. White northerners get to vicariously participate in that because of their cultural knowledge of the Underground Railroad, the actual abolitionist history of some, and the desire for a legacy of virtue that painted them

as fighting a war to end slavery, but the play is nonetheless a story about slaves freeing themselves. The characters are shown as desiring freedom, as being willing to risk all for it, as having some knowledge of resistance to slavery and an antislavery network outside the South, as using the underground railroad to facilitate their escape, and as successfully living independently in freedom at the end of the play. On the one hand, representing the Underground Railroad in this post-Civil War play served to distance the audience from the Civil War itself, to depoliticize it to some degree by making it a mere side note that happens off stage, separate from the primary action of the story. On the other hand, it acknowledged and drew attention to a longer history of black resistance to slavery, African American acts of self-liberation independent of whites, and, implicitly, slaves' role in fleeing and ending slavery themselves during the war itself.⁴⁵⁶

As in Bradford's play, slavery is critiqued and emancipation is represented as a positive good. The play represents the dangers of the absolute control that came with slave ownership, especially with respect to women and families. The romantic female lead, Virginia, is married against her will to the slave driver and it is this outrage that sparks the whole escape plan into action.⁴⁵⁷ Virginia is prepared to run away on her own because she would rather risk capture, sale, and death than

⁴⁵⁶ Given that it would have been very unusual for an entire family to escape together prior to the Civil War, the characters' collective escape may have called to mind the wartime flight of "contraband" slaves. Foner writes briefly about the changing nature of flight and fugitives after the outbreak of the Civil War. Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 221-224.

⁴⁵⁷ When Mammy tells Sam about the marriage, she exclaims, "Dey's gone an married dat dear chile, dat lamb ob a Jinny, to dat rascal ob an oberseer Jim. ... Yes, deys bring dat gal up like a lady; she never done nuthin' but jes wait on Marse fambly an' now ole Marsers' dead dey's gone an' married her, their way to Jim an' de gal can't bar de sight ob him. It's de meanes' thing I eber seed." Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 102.

consummate her marriage to this man she does not love. As she tells Sam and the others, “... it’s hard to leave the place where I was born, but it is better to do this, than to remain here, and become what they wish me to be. To fulfill this so-called marriage.”⁴⁵⁸ The slaves also learn that there is rumor they are all to be sold the next day, further threatening the integrity of the family and separation of its members.⁴⁵⁹ The action of the play shows that slave owners can dispose of their property as they wish – selling human beings and interfering in the most intimate aspects of their lives without consent. After he learns about Virginia’s marriage to the overseer, Sam comments on the way owners treat and dispose of them like animals, “An’ dats’ de way they treats dar slabs! An’ den they tells how kin’ dey is, an’ how satisfied we is, an’ den thar dogs an’ horses.”⁴⁶⁰ The slave owners are criticized as cruel, but white slave owners are not vilified entirely because it is the second generation of owners that is so callous. The elderly slaves remember their first owners, the parents of these adult children who now own them by right of inheritance, as comparatively kind.⁴⁶¹ This was a very compromised but familiar antislavery argument that not all slave owners were necessarily bad, but the trouble with slavery was that human beings treated like property always stood the chance of ending up in unscrupulous and violent hands – much like Uncle Tom’s transfer

⁴⁵⁸ The play also alludes to the routine violence enacted within slavery when Jim tries to collect Virginia and threatens to tie her up and whip her in order to get her to submit to the marriage. See Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 104, 106.

⁴⁵⁹ Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 106.

⁴⁶⁰ Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 102.

⁴⁶¹ Multiple passing references are made to “old Marse and Mistress” and the comparatively kind treatment they experienced during that early time, in contrast to the unfeeling current generation. Mammy says that “old Marse” would never have allowed Ginny to be married to Jim against her will. See Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 101, 103, 106, 119.

from the kind Augustine St. Clare to the murderous Simon Legree. Whatever their treatment in the past, the characters in this play always possess a desire and hope for freedom.⁴⁶² After they emancipate themselves and establish themselves in Canada, the characters are shown as no longer speaking in dialect, having professions, and living independently.⁴⁶³ This would seem to make slavery all the more cruel because it prevented these people who always had this capacity/potential from realizing it and trapped them in another world.⁴⁶⁴

The play also challenges some of the “old plantation” stereotypes, especially in the character of Sam’s mother, Mammy. The very name “Mammy” marks the way that Sam’s mother is primarily defined by whites in that role. Her character speaks in the play of a fondness for her previous owners and of sweet memories of raising the white children as if they were her own.⁴⁶⁵ But Mammy simultaneously has that connection and compassion for the white family that once owned her and an unwavering desire for freedom. We learn that she has been hoping and praying for

⁴⁶² Characters express their hope and longing for freedom, for themselves and their loved ones, throughout the play. See Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 103, 104, 105, 107, 109, 118.

⁴⁶³ At play’s end, we learn that Virginia is a professional singer, Juno is a school teacher, Sam is running for Congress (and subsequently gets elected), and Caesar and Mammy have married. Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 119. A review for a performance of *Peculiar Sam* in Milwaukee in 1879 noted that the final scene showed the former slaves in the North, “where they had become respected and comfortable citizens.” “Amusements: The Underground Railroad,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, April 1, 1879.

⁴⁶⁴ In *Out of Bondage*, the younger generation of former slaves are so transformed after their years in the North that their parents can barely recognize them. In contrast, in *Peculiar Sam*, when Sam returns home to the family in Canada after successfully being elected to Congress, Caesar says, “Lef me look at you, I wants to see ef you’s changed any. (shakes his head solemnly) No, you’s all dar jes de same. {to MAMMY} Ol’ ‘ooman, I allers knowed dat boy neber growed dat high her nuthin.” Caesar’s comment suggests that Sam always had the potential and capacity that has finally been realized in his election to Congress. Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 121.

⁴⁶⁵ As mentioned previously, the fondness she expresses for her former owners is also qualified because she contrasts the kindness of the first generation with the mistreatment of the second generation that has inherited them. The audience sees that her love and devotion to the children was not reciprocated or respected once those children grew into slave-owning adults.

freedom her entire life, even as she served the whites. Devoted or not, Mammy ultimately chose the sanctity of her *own* family over loyalty to the white family when she decided to escape with Sam and the others. Indeed, it was Mammy who told Sam that a day would come when the slaves would be set free. When he finds that Virginia has been married to another and feels driven to desperate action, Sam asks, “Mammy, when am dat time comin' dat you's tol me 'bout eber since I was knee high to a cricket, when am Moses gwine to lead us forsook niggers fro' de Red Sea?”⁴⁶⁶ Mammy tells Sam not to despair, that “de Lord am comin' on his mighty chariot, drawn by his big white horses, an' de white folks hyar, am a gwine to tremble. Son Ise been waitin' dese twenty-five year, an' I aint guy up yet.”⁴⁶⁷ Mammy may have felt affection and love for the white family, but she was also holding onto the hope of deliverance from slavery.

The play presents a mixed view of Reconstruction. The fact that the family is still living in Canada, while Sam has just been elected a senator in Ohio, is a reminder that even the “free states” were unsafe for African Americans at one time and perhaps a suggestion that they can still enjoy more freedom in Canada than in the U.S., even after the war. Freedom created new opportunities for African Americans and Hopkins represents the examples of both Sam and Overseer Jim: Jim, who still speaks in dialect, has become a laughable lawyer, while Sam has earned a place in public office. African Americans experienced some political gains in the wake of emancipation, but many whites feared that former slaves were entirely

⁴⁶⁶ Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 102-103.

⁴⁶⁷ Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 103.

unprepared for those new responsibilities or their new station in life – the unscrupulous, uneducated, buffoonery of Jim was often assumed to apply to newly-elected black officials in state and federal government. At the same time, Jim’s limitations are tied to his overall character rather than his race – he is not favorably portrayed before or after emancipation and one might suggest that both his professions – first as an overseer and later as a lawyer – were viewed as unsavory. Jim’s character may have satisfied white audiences by not asking them to imagine or accept that *all* former slaves were capable of the transformation displayed by Sam.⁴⁶⁸

Studies of African American Civil War memory have focused on remembrance within the African American community, public commemorations (such as Emancipation Day celebrations) that took place on a handful of days each year, and the leading role of African American men in helping to sustain a memory of emancipation and African American men’s war-time military service as a legitimate claim to freedom and citizenship for the race. Very little attention has been given to the way that African Americans contributed to public representations of slavery, the Civil War, and emancipation in popular culture venues that stood to reach a much broader audience. Performances of *Out of Bondage* and *The Underground Railroad* were not as ubiquitous as the contemporary “Tom show,” but they nonetheless offered an alternative view to such popular productions. The

⁴⁶⁸ When Jim reintroduces himself in the final scene, he hands the family his business card, which reads, “Mr. James Peters, Esq., D.D., attorney at law, at the Massachusetts bar, and declined overseer of the Magnolia plantation.” Jim continues to speak in dialect and tells them that after emancipation, “... I started North, got as far as Massatoosetts, found the eddicational devantages were ‘ery perfectible, an’ hyar I is, one ob de pillows ob de Massatoosetts bar.” Hopkins, *Peculiar Sam*, 121-123.

Hyers Sisters troupe presented *The Underground Railroad* to audiences across the country, 1879-1880; it had a more limited run than *Out of Bondage*, but still enjoyed many performances and reached a significant number of people.⁴⁶⁹ *Out of Bondage* was one of the troupe's primary offerings for more than a decade (1877-1891) and was performed repeatedly in major cities like Chicago, Boston, Milwaukee, Denver, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Cleveland. In their presentation of both plays, the Hyers Sisters Company engaged audiences by simultaneously satisfying some audience expectations and challenging others. For those who criticized *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a gross exaggeration, these plays avoided polarizing extremes while still representing emancipation as a positive good. Without alienating white northerners who increasingly favored a reconciliationist narrative of the war which did not vilify the South entirely, these plays still succeeded in sustaining a memory of slavery's abuses; of African Americans' resistance, flight, and desire for freedom; and of the promises that accompanied emancipation. The fact that this was orchestrated by a theater company led by two African American *women* challenges the typical historical narrative which has seen black women as playing a more symbolic, less visible, and largely supportive role in the construction of African Americans' collective memories of the Civil War. (Not to mention that these particular black women were instrumental in disseminating this emancipationist memory to the larger, white public.) The representations of slavery which the Hyers Sisters performed on stage also reinserted African American women into the

⁴⁶⁹ Allen notes that a single performance in Boston in July 1880 brought in an audience of 10,000. Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 36.

public narrative regarding emancipation; the characters they portrayed challenged familiar stereotypes of black women, while also representing enslaved women as equal participants in the pursuit of freedom. The African American performers who were part of these shows and musical dramas made a significant and distinct contribution to public understandings of race, slavery, and the Civil War.

Sorrow Songs and Civil Rights: The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers

The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers offered another alternative to the romanticized “old plantation” myth when they performed “sorrow songs” for northern white audiences in the 1870s and 1880s. For whites, these plaintive songs, which spoke of trials in this world and comfort in the next, evoked vivid scenes of the plantation past, where they conjured images of men and women singing the same songs as they endured the hardships of slavery. Although there was something potentially disempowering about the way that white audiences imagined the slave figure only as suffering victim, it was nonetheless valuable for the Jubilee Singers to help sustain a memory of slavery’s abuses during a time when the nation was pushing the peculiar institution further from its memory. In doing so, the Jubilee Singers helped promote and actually engaged whites in constructing an emancipationist memory of the Civil War, which focused on the end of slaves’ suffering as one of the most important consequences of the conflict. Appealing to their audiences’ desire to see themselves as heirs to a legacy of abolitionist reform, the Jubilee Singers re-politicized the memory of slavery and the Civil War by using

the public platform to draw attention to their experiences of discrimination, segregation, and unequal treatment in the present day and to challenge whites to fulfill the promises of emancipation.

Classically-trained singers who were prepared to perform a range of material, the Jubilee Singers made a conscious choice to center their performances on the slave spirituals which whites thought these “sons and daughters of Ham” were particularly suited to present.⁴⁷⁰ Although reviews often spoke of the Singers’ “natural” and “untutored” ability to perform the sorrow songs, members of the troupe often didn’t personally identify with the music in the way their audiences expected. Several Singers stated that they viewed the sorrow songs as the music of their parents and grandparents, not as their own.⁴⁷¹ Initially, the Singers actually felt less prepared to perform the slave spirituals than they did the more classical

⁴⁷⁰ “The Jubilee Singers at Kelso,” *Kelso Courier*, 3 Nov. 1876, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1876-1877, Box 7, Jubilee Singers Archives (Original), 1858-1924, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁴⁷¹ For example, Jubilee Singer Thomas Rutling described the jubilee songs as “the songs of my enslaved ancestors” and “the songs of their fathers.” Maggie Porter wrote about “The old plantation songs expressing the heartaches and prayers of our parents.” See Rutling, “Tom:” *An Autobiography, with Revised Negro Melodies* (Torrington, N. Devon, England: Thos J. Dyer, Printer, 1907-1909?), 17; Maggie Porter to Mr. Allison, Detroit, September 28, 1934, Envelope 10, Box 6, Jubilee Singers Collection, Fisk University Special Collections. Given that most members of the troupe were young at the time of emancipation, their experience and memory of slavery was from a child’s perspective rather than that of an adult who had been living under its yoke for decades. They were familiar with the music which enslaved men and women sang as a source of comfort, release, and personal expression, but *singing* those songs was not necessarily a regular part of their own lives. Although white audiences generally assumed that the Jubilee Singers *were* singing the same music they had sung as slaves, it is interesting to note that a writer for the African American newspaper, the *Christian Recorder*, seemed to recognize that the Jubilee Singers were representing something from an older generation. Writing in April, 1875, he commented on a recent Philadelphia performance: “... One thing is noticeable to him who keeps his eyes open, - the students themselves are fast outgrowing these songs of their grief-stricken parents, and in singing not a few of them they themselves seem to enter into the spirit of the audience, and are constrained to smile at the weirdness of their own music. While this detracts somewhat from the entertainment, it is certainly no more than what ought to be expected. Freedom has its fruits as well as slavery. ...” “The Jubilee Singers,” *Christian Recorder*, April 15, 1875.

music they had been trained in. When the troupe was first organized in 1871, they planned to raise money for Fisk University and showcase the capacity, skill, and talent of its African American students by performing a broader range of material, and demonstrating that they could master “more difficult music than they had learned in their slave cabins.”⁴⁷² As part of their training and through their participation in local performances in Nashville, members of the troupe had experience performing popular and classical music, including patriotic songs, Scottish ballads, and selections from opera.⁴⁷³ But when they performed this range of music for their first white audiences in the North, they discovered a public demand for the slave spirituals. It was a concerted effort to build their new repertoire, as the singers struggled to remember particular songs that might be added and practiced constantly under the supervision of Musical Directors George White and Ella Sheppard in order to give their audiences what the white public assumed came so naturally.⁴⁷⁴

Ultimately, the shift to the slave spirituals was also strategic for helping the group distinguish itself from minstrelsy, the predominant performance venue for and representation of African Americans at the time. They didn’t want to be associated with racist caricature, but there were also concerns more generally about making themselves agreeable to church-going audiences who might normally object

⁴⁷² Gustavus D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873), 47.

⁴⁷³ For information about their earlier training and performances, see: Playbills for May 30, [1867], May 31, [1867], and June 11, 1868, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872, Box 7, Jubilee Singers Archives (Original), 1858-1924; Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 46-47. Toni P. Anderson, “Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus”: *The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871-1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 27-28.

⁴⁷⁴ Anderson, “Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus,” 39-41.

to popular entertainment of any kind. Focusing on this particular brand of religious music helped make their performances seem more respectable for the middle-class.⁴⁷⁵ Nonetheless, minstrelsy was the primary cultural reference that most northern whites had for black performance and, thus, comparisons between minstrel performers and the Jubilee Singers were constant. Sometimes negative reviews charged that the Singers were little better than a minstrel show; at other times, audience members commented that seeing the Jubilee Singers revealed previous representations as false (much as was said about seeing African American minstrel performers vs. white minstrel performers).⁴⁷⁶

Part of the Jubilee Singers' appeal, especially in the early years when they were raising funds for Fisk University, may have been the way that their performances and objectives echoed familiar aspects of the antebellum antislavery movement. White northerners were not unfamiliar with listening to the testimony of former slaves, whose public appearances were sometimes very much under the

⁴⁷⁵ One review commented on the importance of them focusing on religious songs rather than popular music. See "The Jubilee Singers in Peterhead," *Peterhead Sentinel and Buchan Journal*, Oct. 18, 1876, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1876-1877. For more about them wanting to distinguish themselves from minstrelsy, see: Anderson, "Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus," 37-38.

⁴⁷⁶ For example, one response to the Jubilee Singers' appearance at Henry Ward Beecher's church was a derogatory sketch of the troupe's performance, captioned "REV. HENRY WARD BEECHER AS THE MANAGER OF A NEGRO MINSTREL TROUPE." The short accompanying text suggested that Beecher had turned his church into a music hall for popular entertainment, suggesting that "It has not yet been announced whether the next performance at Mr. Beecher's theatre will be comedy, opera, or melodrama." See "The Jubilee Singers," *Days Doings* (New York), Jan. 1872, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872. During the troupe's first tour in England, reviewers noted that seeing the Jubilee Singers made them realize how false blackface representations were and that "their representation of negro lie is the merest caricature." Another reviewer wrote that "They are utterly unlike the burnt-cork minstrels with whom we are familiar." See "The Jubilee Singers," *St. Helen's Standard*, Jan. 17, 1874, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1873-1874, Box 7, Jubilee Singers Archives (Original), 1858-1924; "The Colored Students Concert," [*Elmira Daily Advertiser* (Elmira, NY)], [December 12, 1877], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "The Jubilee Singers," [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1873-1874.

control/direction of white abolitionists. In the antebellum era, slaves provided evidence of the horrors of slavery and gave white Northerners insight into the peculiar institution that they did not necessarily have any direct experience with. Those slaves, and the white abolitionists who orchestrated their appearances, tried to gain the sympathy of their audiences and sometimes solicited financial donations, either to support various aspects of the movement or to purchase the freedom of individuals or their family members. The abolitionists and the slaves in their charge tugged at the public's heartstrings by presenting images of slave suffering and victimhood, and often focusing on the particular experience of helpless slave women (and their children) and the way that slavery tore apart families. These appearances contributed to the image of the supplicant and pleading slave, as embodied on the antislavery medallions that asked "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" and "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" They appealed to whites to act as benevolent patrons and rescuers for supplicant slaves who could not help themselves.

Jubilee Singers' performances – and audiences' responses to them – reproduced many features of the scenario described above. When the Singers began touring, they were under the supervision of a white governess as well as the more general supervision of their white manager and musical director – not entirely unexpected given the young age of many of the Singers and their entry into a world where they had little experience. In writing about the troupe, some authors highlighted the role of manager George White, as though the Jubilee Singers were something *he* was presenting to the public and as though *he* (and the white-led AMA) was the one with particular objectives, while the Singers simply provided the

entertainment. This was something Northerners would have been familiar with from the antislavery movement. The Singers did sometimes offer testimony regarding their experience of slavery and more of their personal history was told in the multiple books about the Jubilee Singers that were sold at the time. But the Jubilee Singers primarily constructed a representation of the slave experience through their performance of the sorrow songs. For white Northerners, the songs which the Jubilee Singers performed said much more than their lyrics accounted for – they brought to life the suffering of slaves in slavery. When they wrote about the kinds of scenes of slavery that the music evoked for them, audience members often painted a very gendered image of slavery that focused on women, children, and the disruption of the slave family and home. Whites populated those imagined scenes with representations of slavery that they previously learned from the abolition movement and antislavery rhetoric.

Although all the Singers had been free for several years even at the start of their campaign, whites continued to see them primarily as representations of slaves. Reviewers wrote about imagining the Singers themselves running from slave catchers and hiding in the Dismal Swamp, used the Singers as representatives of the race at large by discussing how degraded blacks had been in slavery and how far they had come in freedom, and objectified the Singers in detailed descriptions of their physiognomy.⁴⁷⁷ Singing the music of the slave past, the Singers seemed to be

⁴⁷⁷ In a program for a Jubilee Singer performance in Great Britain, one of the testimonials was from the Earl of Shaftesbury, who spoke of the singers, saying, “Many of them have been sold not once or twice, but thrice, and even oftener. Some of them, too, have been in the dismal swamp, pursued by their masters and by the savage bloodhound, and they now come here to show to you what the negro race are capable of if you will give them those benefits and opportunities which you yourselves have enjoyed.” See Programme for “The Jubilee Singers: Ex-Slave Students from Fisk University,”

moored in that past – seemed always to continue to represent the suffering and pleading slave, beseeching whites for freedom. Previous relationships of power were recreated in the way that the Fisk students pleaded with audiences for financial donations to help support black education, creating sympathy for what slaves had previously suffered, continuing to represent blacks in a position of neediness, and expressing gratitude for the opportunity to improve themselves. This was all very satisfying to white audiences, who could imagine themselves as benefactors of the race and as playing some part in emancipation and black uplift. The consequences of emancipation and any prospective threat freedpeople might have represented (demanding rights, etc.) were easy to ignore because the Jubilee Singers' music seemed to represent slaves still just on the brink of freedom and depicted emancipation as a gift bestowed by whites, rather than a process in which blacks seized freedom for themselves and fought to defend it.

White northerners' interest in the slave spirituals can be understood as part of the region's increased interest in the South, slavery, and African Americans after the war, as well as the era's turn toward nostalgia and the desire to hear this music that belonged to an earlier time and that many noted would soon be lost with the

performance at Free Trade Hall, Manchester, January 19 & 20, [no year], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1873-1874. As an example of audience members' attention to the Singers' physiognomy, a single article describes the Jubilee Singers variously as "very black," a "full-blooded brunette," "a constructive blond with curly hair," "a handsome, intelligent-looking quadroon," "a charming little quadroon, ... with straight hair," a "Young girl, with eyes and hair (and face) as black as a beaver," and a "Pickaninny, ... black as the (printers) devil." Another reviewer noted, "They are black, some of them jet black, and the best of the female voices coming from the thickest of negro lips." See "Music Extraordinary: The Jubilee Concert Troupe of Ex-Slaves at the First Congregational Church," [Newark?, Evening Courier?], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "The Jubilee Singers," [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

passing of the last generation of former slaves.⁴⁷⁸ The image of the plantation which the Jubilee Singers called up was very different than the romanticized image of the “good old Southern home” that many northerners were attracted to at the time, but their performances nonetheless allowed audience members to mentally journey back to an earlier time and place and feel some connection to its imagined inhabitants. Over and over again, white audience members spoke and wrote about feeling themselves literally transported to the South and scenes of the plantation past when they heard the Singers perform.⁴⁷⁹ This was despite the fact that, for the most part, audience members had little to no direct experience with Southern slavery. Some had heard tell of “The music of the Southern negroes at their prayer meetings” from the letters, reports, and memoirs of soldiers, government officials, and freedmen’s aid workers who went south during the war.⁴⁸⁰ What they hadn’t gleaned from abolitionist rhetoric or returning soldiers they had learned from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Indeed, several audience members related what they heard from the

⁴⁷⁸ This desire to hear and experience the music before it was lost is very reminiscent of the drive to record the memories of former slaves in the WPA interviews of the 1930s, before the last generation of people who had lived as slaves passed away. See Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 11-34.

⁴⁷⁹ For example, see “The Jubilee Singers,” [*Daily American* (Waterbury, CT)], [July 6, 1872], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; “The Praise Meeting Last Evening,” [*New York Journal*], [December 6, 1871], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; “Amusements,” [*Detroit Michigan Tribune*], [May 21, 1872], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872. The Jubilee Singers also performed widely in Great Britain and Europe and audiences there had a similar response, often conjuring scenes in their minds where these songs would have been sung during slavery. One example is this review of a performance in Kelso, Scotland, in which the author writes that, listening to their music, “One could fancy that they had by some strange force of circumstances been transferred from their happy homes and hearths ... to a logwood cabin ... in times gone by, when chains, whips, and cruelty of every conceivable sort were the normal state of the Southern division of the land that boasted liberty and freedom, and was hearing the sighings and groanings which arose from the sons and daughters of Ham in their bondage.” “The Jubilee Singers at Kelso,” *Kelso Courier*, 3 Nov. 1876, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1876-1877.

⁴⁸⁰ “The Jubilee Concert,” [n.d.], [n.p.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

Jubilee Singers to scenes they had imagined from the novel.⁴⁸¹ The music added texture to their preconceived notions of the hardships of slavery and allowed them to indulge in what one perceptive observer described as “the luxury of woe” – the sometimes pleasant feeling of being “made sad without any personal cause for being so.” White audience members enjoyed the luxury of immersing themselves in the drama and pathos which they imagined slaves felt, without suffering any of those hardships themselves.⁴⁸² Jubilee Singer performances allowed northern whites to be “armchair tourists” to a Southern past defined by the “wild yet plaintive melodies which had cheered the days of darkness in Southern cane-brakes, or had relieved the pent up sorrow of the slaves in the cotton field.”⁴⁸³

The Southern plantations which audience members returned to in their minds were sites of anguish, violence, and degradation where mothers cried for children lost. Many audience members constructed detailed narratives based on what they imagined when they heard those simple songs which must “have been sung in thousands of lowly cabins scattered all over the South for scores of years past.” Writing about an 1872 performance in Detroit, one author imagined that this music

⁴⁸¹ See, for example, Theo. L. Cuyler, “Our Native Music—The Jubilee Singers,” Letter to the editor of the *Tribune* (Brooklyn, NY), Jan. 17, 1872 and “The Praise Meeting Last Evening,” [*New York Journal*], [December 6, 1871], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; “The Jubilee Singers at the Congress Hall,” *Whitby Times and North Yorkshire Advertiser* [(Great Britain)], September 22, 1876, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1876-1877; “The Jubilee Singers,” *Buffalo Express* (Buffalo, NY), February 20, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881, Box 8, Jubilee Singers Archives (Original), 1858-1924.

⁴⁸² In his 1859 memoir, James Hungerford wrote about visiting his cousins on the family plantation. While they are out on a boat, the enslaved man who is manning the oars sings a plaintive song at the family’s request and Hungerford’s cousin, Lizzie, remarked, “I like the music, ... it is sometimes pleasant--if I may speak in such a seeming paradox--to be made sad without any personal cause for being so. Such a state of feeling may be called ‘the luxury of woe.’” In Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 74.

⁴⁸³ “The Jubilee Singers in Darlington,” [n.p.], March 1874, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1873-1874.

... was all the comfort they had on earth, all that kept their poor hearts from breaking. ... And so, many a slave mother, whose boy started on the morrow in the coffle for a far-off plantation, or whose husband had been wrested from her and sold, she knew not whither, or whose daughter had been auctioned off for the value of her beauty and her capacity as a 'field hand,' crouched low over the smouldering fire in her lonely cabin, and wildly clutching to her breast the children that remained and were only growing up for a like dreadful fate, gave vent to her anguish in these songs that she had caught from other trembling lips and bursting hearts ...⁴⁸⁴

The rich detail of this description suggests the kind of voyeuristic pleasure which some whites may have experienced when they constructed such dramatic and emotional tableaux in their minds. At the same time, it makes clear that Jubilee Singer performances engaged northern whites in an active remembrance of the very real traumas which enslaved men and women endured prior to emancipation. The scene described above acknowledges enslaved women's helplessness in preventing the loss of spouses and children, the inter-state slave trade which transported one million slaves to deeper regions of the South in the nineteenth century and traded human beings like cattle, the common practices of sexual coercion and concubinage which threatened enslaved girls and women, and the forced labor which underlay the entire system. While white southerners continued to promote the image of African American slaves as loyal and faithful servants who were cared for like members of the family, the sorrow songs which the Jubilee Singers performed gave lie to this rhetoric regarding a benevolent and paternalistic system of human

⁴⁸⁴ "Amusements," [*Detroit Michigan Tribune*], [May 21, 1872], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872. Other examples of reviewers talking about being transported to imagined scenes include Drummond Grant, "The Jubilee Singers," Letter to the Editor of the *Coleraine Chronicle*, December 2, 1876 and "The Jubilee Singers at Harrogate," *Harrogate Herald*, January 17, 1877, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1876-1877.

bondage. It was an easy jump from there to a renewed appreciation for slavery's central place in the late civil war. As one reviewer wrote, "Are there any, who after hearing these children of a once poor, despised race, dare say that slavery was right, or that he who made them free died in vain?"⁴⁸⁵

The Jubilee Singers appealed to their audiences partly because they satisfied some northern whites' desire to see themselves and their region as heir to an abolitionist legacy. Whether individual men and women had supported or participated in it or not, "the North" was a region with a history of freeing its own population of slaves through gradual emancipation, of opposing the expansion of slavery and the Slave Power, of building a vocal antislavery movement, and of giving birth to the sometimes radical Republican Party that elected the martyred President. It is not surprising that white northerners found this legacy more appealing than confronting their region's darker history of slavery, racism, and complicity. According to Robert Penn Warren, the "Treasury of Virtue" which the North claimed as its Civil War legacy recast the "war to restore the Union" as "a consciously undertaken crusade" to end slavery, "so full of righteousness" that all past and future transgressions must be forgiven.⁴⁸⁶ The Jubilee Singers spoke directly to this audience when they performed in cities that were former abolitionist

⁴⁸⁵ "The Jubilee Singers," [*Brooklyn Herald*], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

⁴⁸⁶ Although Warren was writing from the perspective of the mid-twentieth-century, historian Joanne Pope Melish connects his description to an earlier time when she writes about white northerners' efforts to "disappear" their own history of slavery and racism in the nineteenth century. Warren, *Legacy of the Civil War*, 64, 59-66; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*.

strongholds and sought and gained the endorsement of individuals who had been active in the antislavery and freedmen's aid movements.⁴⁸⁷

Allowing the past victory of emancipation to be depicted as a gift gloriously bestowed by whites made it possible to publicly embrace and celebrate the end result – that was the past. In talking about the present, however, the Jubilee Singers took a very active role in insisting that the gift of emancipation was meaningless if whites did not live up to those lofty ideals. The Jubilee Singers put the potentially disempowering image of the suffering slave to political use when they used the stage to speak out about contemporary discrimination, segregation, and unequal treatment. Refusing to stand idly by while those abuses continued, the troupe reminded audiences of the nation's continued responsibility for helping African Americans transition into full freedom and citizenship.

While the troupe's performance of sorrow songs satisfied some white audience members' nostalgia for the abolitionist past, their active protest of contemporary civil rights abuses forced northern whites to confront the racism and

⁴⁸⁷ Gustavus Pike, who managed the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers at one point, spoke directly to this issue in one of the Singers' published histories: "In the old New England town where the Jubilee Singers and myself were spending the summer, the people were intensely interested in governmental affairs. They had given to the country some of the first men who fell in the battles of the Revolution; and when President Lincoln called for seventy-five thousand men to quell the rebellion, a company from this town rushed to join General Butler, and passed with him through Baltimore on the day of the riot. There were many abolitionists among these townspeople, and their interest in the slaves had been pronounced when it cost a struggle. The war had opened opportunities to labor for the freedmen, and the interest in this work had been kept alive by accounts from the missionaries they had given to the service. The advent of the Jubilee Singers was of great interest" Pike, *Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 25-26. Former abolitionists and freedmen's aid workers, as well as missionaries, members and officers of the AMA, and other reformers contributed to the Fisk Jubilee Singers' success by helping to organize, host, and publicize local performances, vouching for the troupe's respectability and providing references and connections for other locations, speaking at events, etc. For some examples, see Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 88-89, 92-95, 101-102, 111-115, 129.

inequality in their midst. The Jubilee Singers frequently experienced discrimination as they travelled and attempted to find lodging in different cities across the North during the 1870s and 1880s. They were turned away from hotels in at least six different northern states and in the District of Columbia. Even in former abolitionist strongholds like Philadelphia and Boston, the Jubilee Singers were refused accommodations on account of their race.⁴⁸⁸ Sometimes the troupe sought lodging when it arrived in a city and were turned away from the hotels they approached.⁴⁸⁹ In other cases, the troupe made advance reservations at hotels and then found themselves turned away on account of their color once they arrived in person.⁴⁹⁰ Even if they found a hotel proprietor who was willing to furnish them with rooms, there was often an objection to them sharing the dining area with white guests.

Hotel managers encouraged and/or required the Singers to take their meals in their

⁴⁸⁸ Just as a sample, I have found references to the troupe's experience with discrimination in Chillicothe, Illinois; Elmira, New York; New Haven and Bridgeport, Connecticut; Newark, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Washington, D.C.; and Boston, Massachusetts. See J. B. T. Marsh, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 17-18, 28, 34-36, and 42-43; Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 78-79, 102, 125-126, 130-133; Unidentified clipping regarding performance at Association Hall, Newark, NJ, [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "The Jubilee Singers in Newark," [*Orengo N.J. Journal*], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "Civilization in Newark," [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "The Jubilee Singers," [*N.Y. Independent*], [March 4, 1872], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872; "Troubles of Jubilee Singers," *Boston Journal*, October 28, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; "The Color Line in Boston: Ill Treatment of the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers—A Hotel Proprietor Warns Them Off," *Daily Evening Traveler*, October 27, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; [Untitled Article], *Stamford Advocate*, February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; Fannie B. Ward, "Capital Chit-Chat: Odds and Ends of All Sorts," *Forney's Sunday Chronicle*, [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; "The Color Line," *Commercial Gazette*, May 6, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; "The Bigotry and Caste of Slavery Contrasted with the Power of the Music of the Former Slaves," [n.p.], June 5, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁴⁸⁹ Pike, *Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 102-105.

⁴⁹⁰ For example, the proprietor of the Continental Hotel in Newark, New Jersey turned the Singers away despite their having made previous arrangements to lodge there. One article noted that the landlord "had supposed, when lodgings were engaged for them, that they were a company of nigger (not negro) minstrels; and, when he discovered that they were the genuine article, and not the imitation, he promptly drove them into the street." "The Jubilee Singers," [*N. Y. Independent*], [March 4, 1872], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

rooms, dine in a separate room, or dine at a different time than the regular guests.⁴⁹¹ In one instance, the troupe recalled that the hotel staff refused to wait on them and they were forced to be “their own bootblacks and chamber-maids.”⁴⁹² Hotel managers often claimed that they objected to the Singers on account of their guests, who either explicitly voiced distaste at the idea of sharing space with African Americans, or who the manager assumed would object if faced with the prospect. The troupe also found the color line drawn as they travelled on different railroad lines. Conductors tried to force them to open up seats for whites, forcibly removed them from a waiting area at one station, and repeatedly tried to force the Singers to ride in the smoking car despite having purchased first-class tickets.⁴⁹³

The Jubilee Singers made these incidents of discrimination known in the towns where they performed. Managers of the troupe later reflected that the Singers’

experience in securing accommodations revealed forcibly a work to be done for the colored people. Our nation, before it can honestly claim to be the land of the free, where all are accorded equal rights, must see to it that public conveyances and places for entertainment, holding licenses for doing business, and entitling themselves to protection by law, make no distinction whatever on account of race or color.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹¹ See, for example, “Troubles of the Jubilee Singers,” *Boston Journal*, October 28, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; “The Color Line in Boston: Ill Treatment of the Original Fisk Jubilee Singers,” *Daily Evening Traveler*, October 27, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; William P. F. Meserve, “The Jubilee Singers and the New Marlborough Hotel,” Letter to the Editor of the [*Daily Evening Traveler*], October 28, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; [Untitled Article], *Stamford Advocate*, February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; [Untitled Article], *Republican Standard*, February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; “The Color Line,” *Commercial Gazette*, May 6, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁴⁹² Marsh, *Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, 44-45.

⁴⁹³ See, for example, [Untitled Article], *Republican Farmer*, February 24, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; “How We Show Our Superiority,” *The Commercial* (Louisville, KY), [1880], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; Marsh, *Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, 39; Pike, *Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 152-153.

⁴⁹⁴ Pike, *Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 79.

Breaking down “This odious and cruel caste-spirit” became part of the Jubilee Singers’ mission after they experienced firsthand the persistence of racism post-emancipation.⁴⁹⁵

Oftentimes the troupe and prominent locals drew attention to these experiences in the local press and on stage, usually sparking support for the singers and for guaranteeing equal access to public accommodations for all African Americans. At concerts, it was typical for the troupe’s director, George White, and/or male members of the Singers to speak to the audience about their experience of discrimination in those cities and in other locations in the North. After the troupe’s relationship with the AMA was dissolved in 1878, Jubilee Singer Frank Loudin became the troupe’s public voice and frequently spoke and wrote about their encounters with racism, discrimination, and civil rights abuses in the North.⁴⁹⁶ Other male and female members of the troupe also spoke and wrote about their experiences to a lesser degree, and participated in joint acts of protest at hotels and on the railroad.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ Marsh, *Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, 17-18.

⁴⁹⁶ One of the original Jubilee Singers, Thomas Rutling, spoke about the troupe’s experience of discrimination at an 1872 performance in New York. See “Congregationalist Convention: Educational Society,” [n.p.], October 16, 1872, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872. For examples of Loudin speaking about discrimination, see “Black and Red: Speech of Mr. F. J. Loudin of the Jubilee Singers,” [Boston] *Daily Evening Traveler*, November 17, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; [Untitled Article], *Stamford Advocate*, February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; [Untitled Article], *Republican Standard* (Bridgeport, CT), February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881; “How We Show Our Superiority,” *The Commercial*, [1880], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁴⁹⁷ For example, a Philadelphia newspaper printed excerpts from the personal letters which one of the female Jubilee Singers (unidentified) wrote to a friend of the company. Her correspondence included discussions of the troupe’s experience of discrimination at hotels and on the railroad, as well as their successful efforts at integrating some theater audiences. See “The Bigotry and Caste of Slavery Contrasted with the Power of the Music of the Former Slaves,” [n.p.], June 5, 1880, Jubilee

In addition to their public speaking, the Jubilee Singers made overt challenges to discrimination in a number of ways. They challenged discrimination when they made advanced reservations at hotels and then forced the issue of contract when those same hotels tried to refuse them service after seeing them in the flesh.⁴⁹⁸ This was also the case when they refused to accept management's request that they dine separately from whites. At the New Marlborough Hotel in Boston, the owner made it known that guests objected to the Singers' presence and asked them to dine at an earlier hour than the rest of the house. Speaking for the whole, George White refused – the Singers took dinner with the rest of the guests, and then left the hotel in protest. In a letter to the editor, George White explained, "We respect ourselves, we could not remain where we could not be treated with respect."⁴⁹⁹ Leaving Bridgeport, Connecticut after another such confrontation, the Jubilee Singers went out of their way to defy any attempts at discrimination on the railroad. The Singers purchased first-class tickets, boarded the first-class car, and then each person took a separate seat by themselves. A local newspaper reported,

Several members of the Legislature ... and other of the white passengers wanted seats, but stood in preference to sharing those occupied by the colored people. Conductor Emmons, seeing how matters were, finally went to the colored passengers and asked them to pair off so as to leave more of the seats free for the others, but not one of them would comply. The white people could sit with them or stand. And stand the legislators and white people did, to the evident enjoyment of the colored element.⁵⁰⁰

Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881. The Jubilee Singers engaged in joint acts of protest during some confrontations on the railroad, as well as on other occasions.

⁴⁹⁸ See, for example, Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*, 132-133.

⁴⁹⁹ George White, "The Color-line in Boston: The Difficulty Between the New Marlboro' Hotel and the Jubilee Singers," Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Evening Traveller*, October 29, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁵⁰⁰ [Untitled Article], *Republican Farmer* (Bridgeport, Connecticut), February 24, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

The National Colored Conference which met in Nashville in May, 1879 took an interest in another instance of railroad discrimination which the Jubilee Singers publicized. Seizing on their experience as a test case for civil rights violations, the Conference filed suit against James Hamilton, the Tennessee Railroad conductor who refused to allow the Jubilee Singers to occupy the first-class car. The case gained national attention.⁵⁰¹

The Jubilee Singers also challenged discrimination and segregation on behalf of the larger African American community when they refused to perform for segregated audiences. At an 1880 performance in Louisville, Kentucky the Jubilee Singers successfully put on a show for the first integrated audience ever to occupy Library Hall. One of the female Jubilee Singers commented that “Some of the strongest rebels in Louisville were there, and they, too, caught the spirit. ... [A] great victory was the seating of the blacks and whites together, an unheard of thing” in this location.⁵⁰² A local newspaper reported that “This troupe will not sing when

⁵⁰¹ My research on this court case is in its early stages. I have found multiple references to the case, U.S. vs. James Hamilton, but have no information on its outcome. An article in the *Christian Recorder* notes that the case was heard in the U.S. Circuit and District Courts and then sent to the Supreme Court. At this point, I am not sure whether the Recorder is referring to the Tennessee Supreme Court, or the federal Supreme Court. “Jubilee Singers’ Civil Rights Case,” *Christian Recorder*, January 6, 1881. For other references to the case and/or the Conference’s decision to pursue it, see “To Prosecute a Railroad,” *Galveston Daily News* (Houston, TX), May 8, 1879; “The People Assemble,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, May 8, 1879; “National Colored Convention,” *Galveston Daily News*, May 10, 1879; “The Exodus: Convention of Colored Men at Nashville,” *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, May 12, 1879; “The Civil Rights Law,” *The Daily Graphic: An Illustrated Evening Newspaper* (New York, NY), October 23, 1880.

⁵⁰² “The Bigotry and Caste of Slavery Contrasted with the Power of the Music of the Former Slaves,” [n.p.] (Philadelphia), June 5, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881. The Singers also pressed the issue of integrated seating in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Princeton, New Jersey. See Marsh, *Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, 43-46.

colored people are not given equal privileges with the whites in the matter of seats.”⁵⁰³

The Jubilee Singers’ actions, and the attention they drew to specific experiences of discrimination in various cities, often inspired sympathy and support in the local press. Newspaper articles with titles like “The Color-line in Boston” and “The Unreconstructed North” frequently commented on the disparity between the nation’s vision of itself as a “Land of Liberty” and the actual status of its African American citizens. In this way the Jubilee Singers effectively challenged their audiences to confront ongoing racism and to fulfill the promises of emancipation by pushing for equal rights.⁵⁰⁴ Following an incident of hotel discrimination in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the *Republican Standard* noted that “We had supposed such contemptible negrophobia had disappeared, at least at the North, but we are mortified to learn that it still lingers even in our own city.” Leading citizens and other audience members often expressed disdain for the hotel keepers who refused the Singers service and for any guests who might object to their presence. If proprietors really did turn the Singers away on account of their white guests, the

⁵⁰³ “The Jubilee Singers,” *The Bulletin* (Louisville, KY), May 22, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁵⁰⁴ Frank Loudin also drew direct attention to the American paradox when he spoke at a benefit concert for the Ponca Indians. Contrasting the Jubilee Singers’ positive experience in Great Britain to their treatment at home, he said, “... in this country, called the freest and noblest the sun had ever shone upon, they had been insulted, thrust from passenger cars into smoking cars, and otherwise cruelly treated. With the severest sarcasm, he asked if this was the freest country the sun ever shone upon. In the most eloquent and forcible language, which produced a profound impression upon the large audience, he declared that the country had not been freed from the curse of slavery, and that by the grace of God they, the singers, would do what they could to enforce the civil rights bill, and give all men equality before the law.” “Black and Red: Speech of Mr. F. J. Loudin of the Jubilee Singers,” *Daily Evening Traveler* (Boston), November 17, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881. For more information about the Ponca Indians’ struggle, see Valerie Sherer Mathes, “Boston, the Boston Indian Citizenship Committee, and the Poncas,” *Massachusetts Historical Review*, Vol. 14 (2012).

Standard urged them to take an independent stand. If hotel owners provided equal accommodations “... without ‘regard to race, color or previous condition’ the growlers, if any remain, would soon be shamed into decency and consent that any other human beings may be treated as they wish to be treated themselves.”⁵⁰⁵

At a performance in Newark, New Jersey, prominent members of the audience, including a Senator, expressed similar outrage at the actions of a local hotel manager. A resolution was passed on the spot, condemning the landlord’s actions and “repudiat[ing] his assertion that the public sentiment of Newark would approve such a course on his part as an utterly unfounded slander upon the intelligence and humanity of our citizens.” A local newspaper commented that it hoped such “outrages” would not be repeated in light of the important work that the Jubilee Singers were doing “... in moulding and manufacturing public sentiment.”⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, in a most remarkable turn of events, Newark’s Board of Education capitalized on public outrage over the Jubilee Singers’ experience by pushing through a measure to integrate Newark’s public schools the very same week.⁵⁰⁷

Some writers urged northern whites to remember and honor their region’s historic commitment to liberty and equality, but others were less hopeful. In response to the same incident in Newark, one writer challenged the northern public’s commitment to the principles of liberty, saying they were happy to proclaim about them at Fourth of July celebrations, but were not ready to defend them when

⁵⁰⁵ [Untitled Article], *Republican Standard* (Bridgeport, Connecticut), February 13, 1880, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881.

⁵⁰⁶ “The Jubilee Singers in Newark,” [*Orengo New Jersey Journal*], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

⁵⁰⁷ Marsh, *Jubilee Singers and Their Songs*, 36; “Civilization in Newark,” [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

put to the test. Instead, “They persecuted and oppressed where they had repeatedly promised to uphold and defend.” Pointing out the hypocrisy of whites’ simultaneous desire and derision for African Americans, he charged that “They wanted the music and the votes of the colored race, but not their personal presence in their cities.”⁵⁰⁸

In public performances that combined sorrow songs with demands for contemporary civil rights, the Fisk Jubilee Singers contributed to the larger public’s memory of slavery, the Civil War, and its emancipationist legacy. Although the white public often assumed and believed that the Jubilee Singers were the natural embodiment of the “weird and plaintive melodies” they sang on stage, these performers made an active choice to appeal to their audiences with the familiar image of the suffering slave which the music seemed to evoke for whites. These performances played on white northerners’ regional and sometimes personal association with the antebellum antislavery movement, reproducing those previous relationships of white benefactor and black victim. Although this representation of slavery and African American freedom sometimes obscured black agency, it nonetheless inspired whites to remember the very real traumas of slavery and to reflect on emancipation as one of the most important consequences of the war. The Jubilee Singers took this a step further when they combined that emancipationist memory of the war with public demands to make freedom mean something by protecting the rights of African Americans in the postbellum era. When the Jubilee Singers spoke about discrimination on stage and in print; resisted specific acts of

⁵⁰⁸ “Civilization in Newark,” [n.p.], [n.d.], Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1867-1872.

discrimination and segregation in public accommodations; and refused to perform for segregated audiences, they showed their audiences what African American freedom looked like – an image that challenged white northerners to acknowledge the racism and inequality that persisted post-emancipation, as well as the reality that free blacks refused to occupy the role of passive and suffering victim once assigned to them as slaves.

CHAPTER FOUR: "STRUGGLES FOR FREEDOM:" REMEMBERING SLAVERY AND FREEDOM AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

In thinking about how slaves wrote and spoke about their experiences of slavery, most scholars will immediately call to mind the published slave narratives of the antebellum era and the WPA interviews of former slaves conducted in the 1930s. These are the primary texts considered in John Blassingame's classic essay on the uses of slave testimony. But another body of testimony and literature was produced by former slaves in the decades between the end of the Civil War and the WPA project of the Great Depression. Between 1866 and 1930, 87 "slave narratives" were written and published by former slaves.⁵⁰⁹ Thirteen of those autobiographies (approximately 14% of the total) were written by or based on the personal testimony of African American women.⁵¹⁰ Although this is a comparatively

⁵⁰⁹ Approximately 97 slave narratives were published by African Americans from 1745 to 1865, while 87 narratives were published 1866-1930. My survey and selection of narratives for this chapter is based on the "Scholarly Bibliography of Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives," created by William L. Andrews, Series Editor of the "North American Slave Narratives" digital collection on *Documenting the American South* (DocSouth), a digital library sponsored by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The "North American Slave Narratives" collection is described as including "all known extant narratives written by fugitive and former slaves published as broadsides, pamphlets, or books in English before 1920." The collection brings together documents from over 70 different U.S. repositories. No further information is given regarding selection criteria. Andrews' bibliography includes translations, as well as narratives that were written by or about people of African descent who did not experience slavery in North America; I have excluded both of these in my own calculations. "North American Slave Narratives," Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.

⁵¹⁰ This count does not include the new editions of Sojourner Truth's and Elizabeth's narratives published during this time period; as they were originally written and published in the antebellum period, I do not examine them as part of women's postbellum writing. The 13 first-edition women's narratives that this chapter examines are as follows: Mattie J. Jackson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson: Her Parentage, Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery, Incidents During the War, Her Escape from Slavery: A True Story* (1866), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jacksonm/jackson.html>; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes* (1868); Millie-Christine, *The History of the Carolina Twins: "Told in Their Own Peculiar Way" by "One of Them"* [1869?], Documenting the American South, 2005, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/millie->

small number, it is significantly more than the handful of female-authored slave narratives produced in the antebellum era.⁵¹¹ The authors of these narratives gained freedom before and after the Civil War, taking advantage of new opportunities to write their stories in the decades after universal emancipation. Mattie J. Jackson published the first of these women's narratives immediately after the war, in 1866, and Emma J. Smith Ray (in co-authorship with her husband, Lloyd P. Ray) published the last in 1926. This chapter focuses on women's postbellum narratives as an important source for understanding how African American women remembered slavery and emancipation as individuals and as authors who

[christine/millie-christine.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/millie-christine.html); Sylvia Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois (Now 116 Years Old), A Biography of the Slave Who Whipped Her Mistress and Gained Her Freedom* (1883), ed. C. W. Larison, in *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: Three African American Women's Oral Slave Narratives*, ed. DeVanna S. Fulton Minor and Reginald H. Pitts (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010); Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney: A Slave Woman* (1889), Documenting the American South, 1997, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>; Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen-Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens* (1890), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/albert/albert.html>; Lucy A. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom* (1891), Documenting the American South, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/delaney/delaney.html>; Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist: Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa as an Independent Missionary* (1893), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/smitham/smith.html>; Kate Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story. Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* (1898), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drumgoold/drumgoold.html>; Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (1902), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/taylorstu/taylorstu.html>; Annie Burton, *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* (1909), Documenting the American South, 1996, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burton/burton.html>; Fanny Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching* (1913), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jacksonc/jackson.html>; Emma J. Smith Ray and Lloyd P. Ray, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. L. P. Ray* (1926), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/rayemma/rayemma.html>.

⁵¹¹ Those antebellum works would include the narratives of Sojourner Truth (1850), William and Ellen Craft (1860), Harriet Jacobs (1861), Louisa Piquet (1861), and Elizabeth (1863).

contributed to larger collective memories of slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War. At the same time, reading women's narratives in the context of the larger body of postbellum narratives helps us situate the work that they were doing. This study surveys an equal number (13) of men's postbellum slave narratives in order to draw attention to the significant ways that gender shaped these stories.⁵¹²

⁵¹² For each decade, I have selected an equal number of men's narratives for every female narrative published during that time; selecting individual men's narratives in order of publication date. For example, 4 first-edition women's narratives were published 1890-1899; I chose the first four men's narratives published in the same decade, based on date of publication – one in 1891, and three in 1892. The 13 men's narratives I selected for close reading and analysis are as follows: William Parker, *The Freedman's Story: In Two Parts* (1866), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parker1/parker.html>; Francis Frederick, *Autobiography of the Rev. Francis Frederick, of Virginia* (1869), Documenting the American South, 2003, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/frederick/frederick.html>; Lewis Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton, and Reminiscences of Slavery* (1870?), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/charlton/charlton.html> (this narrative was selected because there were not three men's narratives published 1865-1869; as such, Charlton's narrative represents the 3rd narrative published by men 1866-1870); Norvel Blair, *Book for the People! To Be Read by All Voters, Black and White, with Thrilling Events of the Life of Norvel Blair, of Grundy County, State of Illinois. Written and Published by Him, and with the Money He Earned by His Own Labor, and Is Sent Out with the Sincere Hope that if Carefully Read, It Will Tend to Put a Stop to Northern Bull-Dozing and Will Give to All a Free Ballot, without Fear, Favor or Affection and Respect* (1880), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/blair/blair.html>; William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People* (1880), Documenting the American South, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown80/brown80.html>; Harry Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery in the United States of America* (1891), Documenting the American South, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/smithhar/smithhar.html>; Robert Anderson, *The Life of Rev. Robert Anderson. Born the 22d Day of February, in the Year of Our Lord 1819, and Joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1839. This Book Shall Be Called The Young Men's Guide, Or, the Brother in White* (1892), Documenting the American South, 2003, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonr/andersonr.html>; Thomas Lewis Johnson, *Africa for Christ. Twenty-Eight Years a Slave* (1892), Documenting the American South, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnsontl/johnsontl.html>; William Walker, *Buried Alive (Behind Prison Walls) for a Quarter of a Century: Life of William Walker* (1892), Documenting the American South, 2003, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gaines/gaines.html>; Booker T. Washington, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/washstory/washin.html>; Henry Norval Jeter, *Pastor Henry N. Jeter's Twenty-five Years Experience with the Shiloh Baptist Church and Her History* (1901), Documenting the American South, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeter/jeter.html>; Thomas William Burton, *What Experience Has Taught Me: An Autobiography of Thomas William Burton* (1910), Documenting the American South, 1998, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burtont/burton.html>; Jared Maurice Arter, *Echoes from a Pioneer Life* (1922), Documenting the American South, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/arter/arter.html>.

For reasons that will be explored in more detail later, it is important to understand that these postbellum slave narratives were not simply a latter-day version of antebellum slave narratives. These works were not written in the context of an organized antislavery movement, but at the impetus of and for the purposes of the individual authors. Many of these writers had lived a significant number of years in freedom before writing their autobiographies and, thus, their experience in slavery is often only one part of the longer life story they constructed. In order to understand how these narratives contributed to post-war representations of the slave past, this chapter focuses on the ways that these authors remembered and wrote about slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War, rather than analyzing their entire contents. Some of these authors wrote very little about slavery and emancipation; for others, these were the primary focus of their narratives. In all cases, women made choices about how and at what length to address that part of their lives; what they chose to say, however brief, mattered.

With the legal end of slavery in 1865, former slaves took advantage of new opportunities to tell their own stories – to create a record of their lives under slavery and in freedom. Much more than is the case for the men’s narratives examined for this study, the female authors of postbellum narratives represent their experience of slavery and struggles for freedom as family affairs. In recording their individual life histories, the women also create a record of the lives and experiences of their parents, siblings, and spouses. Moving beyond the simple declarative “I was born” statement, several of the female authors detail a family lineage that goes back

multiple generations.⁵¹³ Whether they gained freedom as adults or children, they experienced slavery and came to understand it as members of a family. Because of their place in an organized political movement, the antebellum slave narratives sought to comment on slavery as an institution as much as to tell the individual narrator's story. In contrast, postbellum narrators engage in the more intimate political act of writing themselves and their families into national history, not as the undifferentiated "millions ... groaning in bondage" that white abolitionists referred to, but as individual men and women.⁵¹⁴ What results is a narrative that is not only more personal and more focused on identity and experience, but one which also gives detailed testimony regarding the experience of the author's family members – who could not or did not write their own life histories.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman reminds us that the enslaved were "strangers" by definition.⁵¹⁵ Alienating them from their family lineage and history was a tool for justifying their enslavement and defining them entirely in terms of their subjugated status, an attempt to erase their identities as anything other than slaves in order to maintain the racial hierarchy and quell resistance from within and

⁵¹³ For example, Mattie Jackson begins her narrative with a detailed account of her family history, going back to her great grandfather's enslavement in Africa and her grandfather's kidnapping and re-enslavement after gaining his freedom in the North. Susie King Taylor also gives a brief family history that recounts several generations, going back to her great-great-grandmother, who had five sons serve during the Revolutionary War. Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 3-4; Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 1-2. Literary scholar James Olney identifies the "I was born" statement as one of the defining features of the antebellum slave narrative genre. See Olney, "I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, 148-175.

⁵¹⁴ *Liberator*, February 1, 1850.

⁵¹⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). Paul E. Lovejoy writes that one of the defining characteristics of slavery was that slaves "were outsiders who were alien by origin or who had been denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions." Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

without. Who would speak for them when all ties outside the slave system had been severed? When no one could remember them or their families as anything but slaves? When the families they built under slavery were legally powerless and under constant threat of disruption? The formerly enslaved women writing autobiographies after the Civil War learned early the ways that slavery threatened the family through violence, sale, and separation; but they recorded and gave voice to that history. In narratives that often highlighted the strength of mother-daughter relationships, women revealed that the family was not just a site of disruption – it was also the place where many of them learned their first lessons of resistance. Because of slavery’s constant disruption of family ties, as well as enslaved men’s greater chances for a successful escape, many of the women writers grew up in female-headed households and learned those lessons of resistance from their mothers – women who put on a brave face rather than have their pain belittled; did all they could to protect their children from violence and sale; helped husbands escape rather than see them sold into a worse slavery further south; and relentlessly pursued freedom for themselves and their children.

This chapter examines how women wrote about and engaged with larger memories of slavery, emancipation, and the Civil War, making themselves and other women central actors in the story. In his essay, “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920,” literary scholar William Andrews argues that former slaves’ literary representations of slavery shifted dramatically between the antebellum slave narratives of writers like Frederick Douglass and the postbellum narratives of individuals like Booker T. Washington.

Andrews argues that postbellum slave narratives “no longer carried the same social or moral import” in the post-emancipation era. Andrews observes that most postbellum narrators took pride in not having given into despair over their condition and believed that a slave could claim dignity and heroism without trying to escape. Rendering this experience implicitly and explicitly male, Andrews writes, “In the postbellum narrative, a slave does not have to fight back to claim a free man’s sense of empowering honor; diligence in his duties and pride in a task well done say as much or more about a black man’s respectability as running away, especially if that black man is also a family man.”⁵¹⁶ Buried in a footnote, Andrews notes that since only 13 of the postbellum narratives were written by women, he does not include them in his analysis of “typical slave narrators” in the postbellum era.⁵¹⁷ Placing women’s representations of slavery at the center of its analysis, this chapter challenges Andrews’ characterization of the postbellum genre and reveals how much is lost to our understanding when women’s own stories are excluded. Consider, for a moment, if Harriet Jacobs’ narrative never entered the scholarly record because her representation was not “typical” of the majority of male-authored antebellum slave narratives.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁶ William L. Andrews, “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 82.

⁵¹⁷ Andrews, “The Representations of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism,” 79.

⁵¹⁸ In her analysis of the difference gender made to the narratives of Harriet Jacobs and her brother, John S. Jacobs, scholar Jean Fagan Yellin reminds us once again that it always mattered, deeply, *who* was telling the story. Her conclusion is worth quoting at length: “Neither ‘A True Tale’ nor *Incidents* claims that Harriet Jacobs was the victim of physical abuse by a jealous master, as was Aunt Hester, whose torture is described in Douglass’s *Narrative*, or Patsey, whose ordeal is described by Brown. But whereas *Incidents* details Linda’s sexual history, ‘A True Tale’ does not even refer to Norcom’s sexual harassment of Jacobs or to his threat of concubinage. John S. does not mention his sister’s desperate decision to become Sawyer’s mistress; he does not mention her determination, after giving birth to a little girl, that her daughter must be saved from the sexual bondage of women in slavery; he

Many women (and men) writing after the Civil War continued to remember and represent the traumas of slavery. In some respects, the way that the authors of postbellum slave narratives write about the horrors of slavery is not altogether surprising. Whenever former slaves speak or write about the experience of slavery, similar themes emerge – the pain and frequency of family separation; physical and sexual violence; overwork; the chattel principle; and the cruelty of masters and mistresses.⁵¹⁹ This is not because former slaves followed a formula, as some literary scholars argue regarding the antebellum slave narratives; rather, it speaks to the reality that certain things were fundamental to the slave experience under an institution that was based on forced labor, the commodification of human beings, and unchecked power over others. Even if it is not particularly surprising – even if it does not, in and of itself, seem to teach us anything “new” about slavery – it nonetheless matters a great deal that former slaves continued to write about and recite these wrongs for several decades after the Civil War. As many of them noted in their books, they were speaking these truths to a new generation that was increasingly distant from the lived reality of these memories. Some readers had not

does not mention her hopes that the children’s father will free them; he does not mention that she was punished by being sent out to the plantation after rejecting, for a second time, her master’s demand that she submit to concubinage; he does not mention her desperate plan to run away in order to tempt her master to sell the children to their father, who, she thinks, will free them. Although he devotes an entire chapter to his sister, John S.’s telling of her story leaves her story virtually untold. ... Frederick Douglass’s brutalized Aunt Hester and William Wells Brown’s [sic] pathetic Patsey never wrote their lives. Amazingly, John S. Jacobs’s sister did.” Yellin, “Through Her Brother’s Eyes: *Incidents* and ‘A True Tale,’” in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 51.

⁵¹⁹ William Andrews doesn’t necessarily take these themes for granted in the post-bellum narratives because he argues that the authors of these works were not primarily interested in reciting the wrongs they endured under slavery. But, in comparison to the other kinds of representations of the slave experience examined in this dissertation, a body of themes does emerge.

read or heard the earlier iterations of the slave experience from the days of abolition and the Civil War; many that had were all too ready to forgive and forget following the supposed resolution of the “race problem” with emancipation and the desire to turn toward the nation’s future. These truths still needed to be told, and told again. They were told against the backdrop of a growing national amnesia regarding the Civil War and its causes, and in the face of competing narratives that sought to disappear or romanticize slavery’s place in the nation’s history and the mythology of the Old South.⁵²⁰

Following a brief overview of the postbellum slave narratives as a genre, this chapter is divided into three parts: The first section examines how some women wrote about their experience of slavery in a way that represented both the trauma and violence they endured and the ways that they and their family members resisted whites’ attempts to control and define them. In particular, a number of women writers recreated scenes in which they physically resisted acts of violence, implicitly and explicitly challenging whites’ claims to absolute authority over them, as slaves. These representations were significant for the ways that they represented the violence and cruelty of white masters and mistresses in the post-Civil War era, but also for the ways that women represented themselves as more than silent, passive victims. The second section of the chapter focuses on the way that women wrote about gaining freedom through diverse acts of self-emancipation. In contrast

⁵²⁰ For more about national amnesia and the romanticization of slavery as part of the Old South mythology, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*; Clinton, *Tara Revisited*; Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*; Alice Fahs, “The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900,” *Journal of American History* vol. 85, no. 4 (Mar. 1999), 1461-1494; Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*.

to the typical image of independent male heroes striking out on their own, women's "escape stories" showed the heroism of women and mothers and drew attention to the ways that families often negotiated freedom together, sometimes in a protracted struggle rather than a single, dramatic escape. Women's narratives of self-emancipation were particularly important after the Civil War because they reminded readers that slaves had been engaged in a much longer struggle for freedom and that emancipation was not a gift bestowed by Lincoln or the Union Army. The third section of this chapter focuses on the way that Susie King Taylor and other women writers contributed to larger narratives about the Civil War and emancipation when they wrote their personal stories. Although Taylor is unique among these writers for her primary focus on the Union Army and the war itself, her memoir nonetheless helps us think about how this body of writing by formerly enslaved women made a distinct contribution to collective memories of the war's significance. As mentioned previously, an equal number of male-authored narratives were read as a point of comparison for the themes which emerged in the women's narratives. Each section of the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how this sample of male narratives engaged with the topics of resistance, self-emancipation, and the Civil War, respectively.

Slave Narratives after Slavery

The men and women who wrote and published slave narratives after the Civil War represent a wide range of experiences.⁵²¹ A little over half of the writers experienced slavery and gained freedom as adults (18 or older); the rest are divided roughly evenly between those who were children (12 or under) or teens (13-17) during those years.⁵²² They had lived, as slaves, in 18 different states, plus Washington, D.C.⁵²³ A significant number of former slaves wrote about living in multiple states during that period of their lives, but for those who resided in a single state, Virginia, Maryland, and Kentucky were home to the largest numbers.⁵²⁴ Four of the writers experienced slavery in the northern states of Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey. Most of the writers had lived and worked in rural areas, on farms and plantations; only a handful had strictly experienced urban slavery, but a significant number recounted living and working in both rural and

⁵²¹ Data is sometimes limited and often inexact. It was not always possible to determine an author's exact age during slavery or at the time of emancipation, or the location or type of environment (rural vs. urban) where they experienced slavery. The numbers that follow in this section only represent the narratives where a particular determination could be made; they also do not include new editions of narratives that were originally published in the antebellum era.

⁵²² Although it is not always possible to know the author's exact age during slavery or at the time of emancipation, one can generally determine their approximate life stage, such as child (12 years or less), teenager (13-17 years), or adult (18 years or older). Out of a total of 80 individual authors (a few people wrote multiple narratives and/or published multiple editions during this period), over 50% experienced slavery and gained freedom as adults (44/80 = 55%) and the remainder were divided almost evenly between children and teens (17 individuals, or 21 % were in their teens; 19, or 23% were children.

⁵²³ These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

⁵²⁴ For those authors who only lived in one state during their slave experience, 10 lived in Virginia, 8 in Maryland, and 7 in Kentucky. 1-5 authors lived in each of the other states. 20 authors mentioned living in multiple states during slavery.

urban locations over the years.⁵²⁵ Some writers were so young at the time of emancipation that they were not yet working, beyond the occasional task or errand. Those who were older described performing many different kinds of labor. The thirteen female authors wrote about working as household servants, seamstresses and laundresses, cooks, and field hands, among other things. Male writers were more often engaged in “skilled labor” as slaves, working as coopers, tanners, blacksmiths, and carpenters, as well as working in a printer’s shop and tobacco factory. Men (and boys) also worked as field hands, household servants, cooks, and children’s nurses. Some men and women hired out their time.

Approximately 40% of the writers gained freedom in the antebellum era, while the remaining 60% gained freedom in the context of the Civil War. In both of these time periods, individuals gained freedom in a variety of ways, including escape, assistance from the Underground Railroad, self-purchase, manumission, freedom suits, and legal acts of emancipation during and after the Civil War. Many, but not all, of the authors were living outside of the South when they wrote and published their autobiographies.⁵²⁶ A large number were settled in Massachusetts, in particular, but they were spread all over the country – Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New York; Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin; California and Washington state; a few were living in Canada. A few authors wrote and published their

⁵²⁵ In those cases where a determination could be made, 46 authors described living and working in rural areas; 5 in urban areas; and 18 in both.

⁵²⁶ Approximately 23 writers were living in former southern slave states at the time of their manuscript’s publication, plus another 4 who were living in Washington, D.C. Those states included Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

narratives only a few years after gaining freedom; most were written from a greater distance of years and, often, toward the end of the author's life.

Literary scholar William Andrews, who has worked to create a scholarly bibliography of these sources as part of the digital Documenting the American South project at University of North Carolina, categorizes them as both "slave narratives" and "autobiographies" written by former slaves.⁵²⁷ It is tempting to describe these works as "postbellum slave narratives" because that provides a familiar framework for understanding this body of literature, but there is little that unites these works under the category of a single genre. The 82 works that Andrews brings together are an eclectic collection of documents that it is difficult to categorize. They are not simply postbellum iterations of the antebellum slave narratives, focused entirely on describing the individual's suffering under and eventual liberation from slavery – although some *do* follow this model. More often, they are closer to autobiographies or memoirs, in which the author's history of slavery is one part of a longer life story. Authors give varying degrees of attention to their experience of slavery, both in terms of the amount of space they devote to it (from a few sentences to the entire manuscript) and the level of importance they place on that experience within the larger narrative project. A few of the works included in Andrews' bibliography barely constitute autobiographies at all. Ultimately, all that definitively unites this body of sources is that they were written by former slaves and they include

⁵²⁷ Andrews, "Scholarly Bibliography of Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives," "North American Slave Narratives," Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibliintro.html>.

elements of autobiography that represent some portions of the individual's life and/or particular institutions that were important to them. Each one is unique in some way. Trying to divide the body of 82 postbellum narratives into smaller categories in order to eliminate works that are not centered on remembering slavery is a deeply subjective process in which an exception can be found for every "rule" one might wish to create. Therefore, this chapter takes this collection of sources as it is, with no further attempt to disqualify certain texts for analysis or privilege others; some narratives inevitably proved more useful than others. The terms "postbellum slave narrative," "postbellum narrative," "narrative," "autobiography," and "memoir" are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

Although he categorizes them as "slave narratives," Andrews nonetheless suggests that postbellum authors were not primarily interested in representing their lives and experiences in slavery – that they were, in fact, more interested in telling a kind of "rags to riches" story whose main purpose was demonstrating the author's life and accomplishments in freedom, perhaps in an effort to show their fitness for freedom by demonstrating their success as freedpeople and members of the nation. Andrews would contrast this postbellum objective with the different focus and purpose of antebellum slave narratives, in which authors detailed their lives in and escape from slavery in great detail and said very little about their lives in freedom. On the one hand, Andrews is correct – the antebellum narratives *do* do something different. But he does not seem to fully take into account the significance of the different contexts in which these narratives were written. Why *would* one expect former slaves to write the same stories about their lives years and decades

after universal emancipation as they did in the heat of the antebellum abolition movement and the wake of their flight from slavery? Antebellum narratives focused on the author's experience of slavery because they served a particular purpose in the antislavery movement. The fact that they usually said very little about the writer's life in freedom was not because that change, or that part of their life and identity, was unimportant – it was at least partly because these fugitives had spent almost their entire lives as slaves and only a few months or years as freedpeople. There was much less to say about that portion of their lives; they had very little time to reflect on it as they were in the midst of the transition and felt themselves still hunted; and the narratives were sometimes produced very shortly after their successful escape in order to capitalize on the public's interest and attention. In contrast, most of the authors of postbellum narratives were writing at the end of their lives and/or after living a significant number of years in freedom; they placed their time in slavery in a larger and longer context and narrative because they had significant life experiences in freedom; unlike antebellum writers, many if not most had lived the vast majority of their lives as free people. It seems that the choice, therefore, to not tell a story entirely about their lives as slaves should not necessarily be read as an indication that the authors wished to distance themselves from that history, that they did not value or identify with it or place importance on it, or that they wished to show it only as something they had left behind and overcome.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁸ For examples of scholars who argue that post-bellum narratives represent a turning away from the slave past, see: Henry Louis Gates, "Not Gone With the Wind: Voices of Slavery," Feb. 9, 2003, *New York Times*; Gates, "Introduction: The Language of Slavery," in *The Slave's Narrative*, xi-xxxiv;

Frederick Douglass was one of the very few authors of slave narratives who had the opportunity to publish multiple autobiographies and keep telling his story. Each book included more about his experiences, accomplishments, and actions in freedom – because that was now part of his life story too; but that did not indicate that he wished to distance himself from his slave past or that he no longer placed the same level of importance on his life as a slave. In fact, having already written the first autobiography that detailed his slave life, Douglass could have chosen to leave that out of subsequent books, as William Wells Brown did – to start telling the story again from his time of freedom. It was a choice to continue to include that portion of his life and to re-tell that history by repeatedly rewriting it.

The amount of attention which the authors of postbellum narratives give to the subject of slavery varies considerably at times; and it is sometimes tempting to draw conclusions about how important that story was to the author based on what proportion of the overall narrative they devote to it – how many paragraphs or pages it occupies. But it is important to remember that these writers made choices and any information they included about the slave experience, however brief, was included intentionally. The fact that some of the former slaves included in this collection included only a few sentences acknowledging their former status makes one appreciate that those who wrote several paragraphs or pages about it made a choice to say that much – and that what they chose to say mattered, however brief. For a few of the male and female authors examined in this chapter, slavery was

Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920; Andrews, "Reunion in the Post-bellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum* 23 (Spring 1989): 5-15.

incidental to the primary purpose of their writing. For others, it remained an important part of their memory and experience despite their narrative's focus on a longer life. For some, the experience of slavery and process of gaining freedom were absolutely central to the narratives these and women constructed. Despite lacking the imperative of the antislavery movement, many of these authors still chose to write about their lives as slaves in ways that sustained the antislavery message. While the dominant public memories of the Civil War minimized, ignored, or romanticized antebellum slavery, the authors examined in this chapter returned attention to the realities of slavery when they made their personal memories public.

"I rebelled against such government:" Remembering Resistance under Slavery

In abolitionist writing, enslaved women were often put to rhetorical use – talked about by others who attached some symbolic value to their suffering, but left little room for the women to speak for themselves – Frederick Douglass's description of how he witnessed the brutal beating of his Aunt Hester as a child; the "agonizing groans of mothers" referenced in Emancipation Day speeches, as evidence of what emancipation brought to an end.⁵²⁹ Formerly enslaved women

⁵²⁹ Douglass's description of his Aunt Hester is a well-known example in the scholarship. See Douglass, *Narrative, in Autobiographies*, 19-20. In her research on postwar Emancipation Day celebrations in Midwestern black communities, Leslie Schwalm finds that remembering the experience and trauma of slavery was important at some of these events, but it was African American men who took on the more public role of speaking. "... these men emphasized slavery's gendered torments, including the 'agonizing groans of mothers' and the subjugation of slave women to the lust of their masters." Women's experiences in slavery may have been acknowledged and mourned, but women were not the ones to represent them at these events. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 233-234.

writing about their lives after the Civil War claimed the authority to represent their own experiences as more than emblems of silent suffering – gave voice to more than “groans” when they wrote about what slavery had meant to them. Writing their own life histories after the Civil War, women were not side notes or demonstrative examples in someone else’s story or speech – they were central actors in narratives that explored their own experience, identities, and resistance under slavery. In these narratives, postbellum women authors spoke to the traumas of slavery, but also to the ways that they and their family members refused to let it control or define them completely.

Family separation, sale, physical violence, and emotional abuse were a regular feature of enslaved women’s lives, but one of the striking findings for women’s postbellum narratives is how often these writers simultaneously represented that abuse and their resistance to it. Women writers made themselves into more than passive, anguished victims, showing the ways that they challenged white authority and whites’ definitions of the extent of their power over them. This was not a rejection or belittling of what it meant to be victimized – women showed that violence could be arbitrary, irrational, or calculated; they drew attention to the sometimes permanent wounds inflicted on them; they recalled their physical and emotional suffering – in the process, reminding readers of the dangers inherent in a system that allowed one human being to own and exercise absolute authority over another. But they also revealed their resistance to that authority – the way they challenged whites’ authority to beat and sexualize them, to inflict arbitrary punishments, and to set the terms of their lives. Resisting was a fundamental

challenge to their status as slaves because it challenged white authority over them and all the assumptions that accompanied it – that slaves could be treated like animals, that slaves could be beaten and abused, that slaves could be forced to work, that slaves could be separated from family, that slaves could be sold and disposed of. All of this was premised on and justified by the idea of white supremacy and black inferiority; slavery was built on a racial dichotomy that ranked whites as human and people of African descent as less than human. In challenging white authority over them, enslaved women’s acts of resistance fundamentally challenged the status and identity which whites used to justify it. When women wrote about this after the Civil War, they re-enacted that resistance for their readers and fundamentally challenged competing representations of slavery that romanticized the Old South, the plantation “family,” and the supposedly beloved and loyal “Mammy.”⁵³⁰

Women’s resistance took many forms. Bethany Veney’s narrative provides a useful example for thinking about the range of ways that women represented their rejection of white authority and slave status. *The Narrative of Bethany Veney* was published in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1889. The book is written in Veney’s first-person voice and is based on her testimony, but it was actually penned by Revered

⁵³⁰ Historian Micki McElya examines some of the ways that white southerners clung to and perpetuated the image of the faithful slave into the twentieth century. Significantly, she writes, “The myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves – of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism – seem not to exist at all.” The formerly enslaved women who wrote postbellum slave narratives refuted this particular desire for and attempt at erasure when they detailed the traumas they endured under slavery, the violent and antagonistic relationships they had with most of their masters and mistresses, and their resistance to cruel treatment and servile status. See McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

Bishop Mallalieu.⁵³¹ He clearly frames Veney's narrative as an antislavery story, modeled after those published in the antebellum era, and focuses almost entirely on her experience of slavery, despite the fact that the book was written almost three decades after Veney's emancipation and relocation to the North. In the "Introductory Letter" and "Preface" that precede the narrative, Mallalieu and another writer identified only as "M. W. G." suggest that the book is a way to instruct current and future generations about the history of slavery in the U.S. and that Veney is a particularly worthy subject and example because of her steadfast religious devotion. Mallalieu writes that, "Betty Veney may have been born a slave, but the pure soul that looked out of her flashing eyes was never in bondage to any miserable being calling himself her master."⁵³² However, the actual narrative says almost nothing about Veney's religious belief, which suggests to me that although the editors wanted to frame the story in that way, that is not what Veney focused on in her own retelling. However virtuous and deserving an emphasis on her faith and endurance might have made her seem, Veney chose to represent herself primarily in terms of the way that she challenged slavery and whites' control over her throughout her life.⁵³³

⁵³¹ The author of the preface, identified only as "M. W. G.," acknowledges that Veney's exact language is not preserved, but it is unclear how much liberty Mallalieu took. At times the editorial voice emerges more strongly, as when he comments on the larger institution of slavery or the lessons he hopes readers will take from the story. Most of the time, however, the writing stays focused on Veney's personal experiences. M. W. G. noted, "It is greatly to be regretted that the language and personal characteristics of Bethany cannot be transcribed. The little particulars that give coloring and point, tone and expression, are largely lost. Only the outline can be given." Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 6.

⁵³² Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 5-6.

⁵³³ One chapter out of 10 talks about Veney's "Religious Experiences;" in it, she describes her initial conversion as a young girl and her attempts to attend church and learn more. This, too, is framed by her in terms of the tension between her master's attempts to control her and her own willfulness to attend church if she could find a way. See Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 15-17.

Like other women authors, Veney's description of her life in slavery reveals that she experienced many of the abuses and traumas associated with it – physical violence, the chattel principle, the threat and reality of sale, separation from her husband and child. Her descriptions of these various events acknowledge the heartache, fear, and physical suffering she experienced, while pointing to the *inhumanity* of the whites who beat, sold, and tried to control her. At the same time, however, Veney does not portray herself as passive victim – a representation that might have served the antislavery ends of the white writer and editor of her book. In her narration, Veney emphasizes the way that she experienced and endured these painful events, while also challenging white authority and trying to assert some autonomy whenever possible. She was not always successful in her negotiations, but she fought back nonetheless and sometimes did achieve her aim, if only insofar as frustrating her master's plans and intentions.

Veney represents herself as constantly resisting the terms of her status as a slave. As a child, she runs and seeks help rather than allow herself to be whipped by a master who places impossible work demands on her.⁵³⁴ Later, as an adult, she insists on setting the terms of her marriage to another slave, Jerry. Although their masters urged the couple to simply consider themselves married without any formal ceremony, Veney refused to move forward until a minister was available to officiate. She then told the minister, "I did not want him to make us promise that we would always be true to each other, forsaking all others, as the white people do in their marriage service, because I knew that at any time our masters could compel us

⁵³⁴ Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 10-13.

to break such a promise.” Slave owners often viewed slave marriage as a casual affair that could be broken up as easily as it was put together, all according to their will. But Veney insisted on respecting the sacredness of marriage, both by waiting for someone qualified to officiate a formal ceremony and by refusing to make vows that she would be forced to break.⁵³⁵ Veney’s worst fears were realized a year later when Jerry is being sold to pay his master’s debts. The slave trader who buys him offers to purchase Veney, too, suggesting that this will allow the couple to stay together. But Veney realizes that, “once exposed for sale in a Southern market, the bidder with the largest sum of money would be our purchaser singly quite as surely as together.” Instead, she helps Jerry hide while they weigh the options of running away or trying to find a local buyer for him. When this fails and the slave trader comes to collect her husband, asking Veney to gather Jerry’s belongings for the trip south, Veney curses him and refuses until Jerry urges her that it is no use.⁵³⁶ The expectations that accompanied slavery and white mastery demanded and presumed that Veney would accept the sale and possible separation; that she would agree to whatever offer was made to her; that she would do as she was told. Instead, Veney represented her constant defiance of these expectations as she repeatedly questioned the word and authority of the men who were trying to exercise control over their lives.

Several years later, Veney is purchased by the same slave trader and separated from her daughter. Veney writes, “McCoy had bought me away from my

⁵³⁵ Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 18.

⁵³⁶ Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 19-25.

child; and now, he thought, he could sell me, if carried to Richmond, at a good advantage. I did not think so; and I determined, if possible, to disappoint him.” Veney learned how to make herself seem sickly on the auction block so that the doctor who inspected her “turn[ed] from [her] with a shiver of disgust;” when potential buyers inspected her and asked her questions, she “replied in the ugliest manner [she] dared.” She succeeded in driving her price down so much that the slave trader could make no profit by selling her; he keeps her in his household and, later, allows her to hire herself out.⁵³⁷ Her actions did not reverse the sale or reunite her with her daughter, but they did succeed in frustrating her new owners’ efforts, undermining his authority, and eventually putting her in a position of greater independence. Later, when she learns that she is once again in danger of being sold to pay her owner’s debts, she is determined to run rather than be separated from her young son. The man she is hired out to, a Northerner with business interests in the South, involves himself and eventually purchases her freedom – but prior to that resolution, she views him as interfering with her own plans to run away rather than as a needed “savior.”⁵³⁸

The women who wrote postbellum slave narratives represented themselves taking action to resist slavery and white mastery in a variety of ways. However, one of the most striking themes to emerge is women’s resistance to physical violence.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 27, 29-32.

⁵³⁸ Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 35-37.

⁵³⁹ This was not true for all women writers. In particular, women who gained freedom when they were young children often did not address enslaved women’s resistance to violence in a significant way. This is at least partly explained by their limited experience and memory of slavery. Such examples include Amanda Smith, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Kate Drumgoold, Annie Burton, and Emma J. Smith Ray. At the same time, many of these women do discuss other kinds of resistance, such as escapes.

Frederick Douglass's description of his physical confrontation with the slave breaker Covey was a dramatic and startling moment in his 1845 narrative – to think of a slave daring to physically lash back at a white man. Douglass portrays it as a transformative moment in which he asserts and reclaims his manhood; but that assertion of his gendered identity was also an assertion of and insistence on his humanity, a refusal to be treated like something less.⁵⁴⁰ In their post-war memoirs, women wrote about the ways that they and their mothers also challenged whites' authority to enact physical and sexual violence on them. Their representations acknowledge the pain and trauma of that violence and expose the inhumanity of the *whites* who inflicted it on them. But in recreating those scenes for the reader, they also represented themselves as pushing back – refusing to accept that violence or the “less than human” status or identity that it implied. A number of these women portray their resistance as being inspired and/or assisted by their mothers. The remainder of this section will examine the way that Lucy Delaney, Sylvia Dubois, Mattie Jackson, and Elizabeth Keckley represented their responses to violence.

Lucy Delaney published her autobiography, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom*, in St. Louis, Missouri in 1891. Her narrative is explored in more detail in Section 2 of this chapter, but her description of and response to violence within slavery provides a useful starting point for an examination of these themes in women's postbellum narratives. Among the other female-authored postbellum narratives, Delaney's life story is unique in that she and her mother, Polly Crocket, successfully sued for their legal freedom in the late 1830s

⁵⁴⁰ Douglass, *Narrative*, in *Autobiographies* 64-65.

and early 1840s. Though held a slave since birth, Delaney was granted her freedom on the basis that her mother became legally free after a period of residence in the free state of Illinois and was kept in slavery against the rule of the law.⁵⁴¹ Because Crocket was held as a slave, Delaney inherited her mother's status, but she also inherited her mother's belief that she was not a slave by law. In many ways, Delaney represents her own experience of slavery as a contest of wills – her owners' attempts to control and define her, and her repeated resistance to those efforts. Perhaps the central example of this is when Delaney recreates the scene of a violent confrontation with her mistress; herein the reader witnesses both the lengths that this genteel "southern belle" would go to exercise her authority over her slave property, and Delaney's refusal to submit to those terms.

Delaney talks back when her mistress criticizes her laundry work and calls her a "lazy, good-for-nothing nigger." She writes,

⁵⁴¹ I will discuss this in more detail in the next section of the chapter, but there is a degree of conflict between the legal record of Polly Crocket's history and what Delaney represents in the narrative. Partly through an omission of details, Delaney's representation suggests that her mother was born free and kidnapped and sold into slavery as a child. A careful examination of the language shows that Delaney never actually states this directly; she only indicates that her mother was previously free – it is up to the reader to discern whether that means she was born free or was born a slave and gained her legal freedom at some later point, before being sold into slavery again. The legal record for Polly Crocket's freedom suit suggests that she was born a slave in Kentucky and subsequently brought to the free territory of Illinois, where, after more than 90 days of residence, she would have been considered legally free. However, her then master never granted her freedom, he had plans to try to circumvent the residency law by taking Delaney out of state for a period of time, but later decided to simply sell her. She was not a child, but in her teenage years when she was taken south and sold to a new family. By whatever means, Polly became aware that she should have received and was entitled to her legal freedom in Illinois based on her residency and she later sued for her freedom on that basis; according to Delaney, Crocket talked to her daughters about the fact that she was supposed to be a free woman and instilled in them the idea that they were also free on that basis. It is unclear whether she provided any detail about how she came to be free. As I said, I will take this up in further detail in Section 2, where the story of their freedom is central. For our purposes here, what matters is that Delaney believed herself to be free because her mother should have been legally free. For a more detailed discussion of the discrepancy in sources, see Lea VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

I was angry at being called a nigger, and replied, 'You don't know nothing, yourself, about it [the laundry], and you expect a poor ignorant girl to know more than you do yourself; if you had any feeling you would get somebody to teach me, and then I'd do well enough.

In this bit of dialogue, Delaney draws attention to the fact that her mistress's own domestic skills are lacking and that knowing how to do that kind of work isn't something that comes "naturally" to slaves or African Americans; rather, it is a skill that must be learned. Her response challenges her mistress's attempt to define her with the application of that degrading term, as well as ideas about African Americans' innate suitability for servile status. When her mistress responds by threatening to whip her, Delaney tells her, "You have no business to whip me. I don't belong to you." She writes, "My mother had so often told me that she was a free woman and that I should not die a slave, I have always had a feeling of independence, which would invariably crop out in these encounters with my mistress." When her mistress shouted back at her and tried to beat her with every available object, Delaney writes, "I rebelled against such government, and would not permit her to strike me; she used shovel, tongs and broomstick in vain, as I disarmed her as fast as she picked up each weapon." In this dramatic scene, Delaney represents her own insistence that she will not be defined as a "n----r" or a slave and will not accept the violence that her mistress believes that status allows her to inflict; when her mistress tries to exercise her last vestiges of power by selling Delaney for her recalcitrance, Delaney challenges that authority as well by running to her mother for help.⁵⁴² The other women authors of these narratives did not

⁵⁴² Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 24-32. Although recent scholarship has given more attention to the ways that female slave owners exerted mastery, sometimes through violence, the

always state it as directly as Delaney, but they made a similar assertion about the master-slave relationship when they recounted their own acts of resistance to physical violence and punishment. They were *all* saying, in short, “You have no business to whip me. I don’t belong to you.”⁵⁴³ In doing so, they challenged a fundamental tenet of slaveowners’ power.

Sylvia Dubois (Now 116 Years Old), A Biography of the Slave Who Whipped Her Mistress and Gained Her Freedom was published in New Jersey in 1883. As the subtitle suggests, Dubois’ resistance to authority was central to her identity and to the life story she told. Like many postbellum slave narratives, Dubois’s text does not fit a classic slave narrative model and is difficult to categorize. The book was written and published by C. W. Larison, an amateur historian who was primarily interested in what Dubois could reveal about an earlier time in the nation’s history, rather than her experience of slavery per se.⁵⁴⁴ The book is based on Larison’s interviews with Dubois and he structures most of the text as a conversation between the two of them. Dubois’s remarks and responses to Larison’s questions are in quotation marks and written in her first-person voice, which is often

predominant image of the brutal slave owner is still gendered male. Both the female and male authors examined for this study recalled the violence that white women enacted with some regularity, reminding us that it was not an aberration, but a tenet of mastery that many white men and women lived by. Historian Stephanie Jones-Rogers argues that young white women in slaveholding families were socialized and trained to adopt the role of slave mistress and, even as young girls, began to explore and practice “different management and disciplinary techniques with the enslaved people they owned,” including the use of physical violence. Jones-Rogers, “Mistresses in the Making,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, 7th edition, ed. Linda K. Kerber et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 139-147. Also see Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

⁵⁴³ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 26.

⁵⁴⁴ Dubois’s narrative is also unusual because its writer and editor was an advocate of Spelling Reform (as defined by the Committee on the Reform of English Spelling) and wrote the original text according to their phonetic rules. I rely on scholar DoVeanna S. Fulton Minor’s “translation” of the narrative using traditional spelling methods. See Fulton Minor, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 135-136.

rendered in dialect. In the preface, Larison notes that preserving her voice was important to him and, aided by short-hand notes taken during the interviews, he wrote most of the text “exactly as she related the facts to me.”⁵⁴⁵ Reading the exchange between Larison and Dubois, it is clear that Dubois often spoke her mind and sometimes used her responses to challenge Larison’s statements and assumptions, or shift the focus of the subject. Although Dubois did not actually write the narrative herself and it is undoubtedly shaped by Larison’s own interests and editorial choices, it nonetheless helps us understand how Dubois represented her own life and experiences, including under slavery.⁵⁴⁶

Dubois gained her freedom in her teenage years after a violent confrontation with her mistress. Prior to that, she recalled that her first introduction to violence was in seeing the way her mother was treated by their master, Minical Dubois. Although she is separated from her mother, Dorcas Compton, as a child and devotes relatively little space to her in the book as a whole, the text nonetheless suggests that Dubois placed importance on her mother’s memory and may have valued the ways that Compton resisted cruel treatment.⁵⁴⁷ As an illustration of this, when

⁵⁴⁵ Larison writes, “As much of the matter entering into the composition of this book was gotten from her [Dubois], in a colloquial manner, and as this was put upon paper, in short-hand, just as she spoke it, and as by giving her own words in the order and style in which she spoke them, portrays more of the character, intelligence, and force of the heroine than can possibly be given in any other way. I have written the most essential parts of it, exactly as she related the facts to me.” Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 135.

⁵⁴⁶ In her Introduction to *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, Fulton Minor argues that scholars have wrongly dismissed “the significance of oral slave narratives as texts *authored* by their narrators.” Sylvia Dubois and other female narrators employed Black feminist orality as a means for self-representation. Minor argues that “These narratives offer examples of nonliterate Black women’s negotiated mediation and their self-assertion through – and sometimes despite of – scribes who have their own subjective aims. See Fulton Minor, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 1-11.

⁵⁴⁷ Dubois immediately seeks out her mother when she gains her freedom, so it is likely that they maintained some level of contact after their initial separation when Compton is bought by a different master.

Latimer asked her who her father was, Dubois gave a short, three-sentence reply, identifying him as Cuffy Bard and mentioning that he was a fifer for the minutemen during the American Revolution.⁵⁴⁸ When he asked her who her mother was, Dubois launched into a three-paragraph response detailing her mother's history and treatment, transfer and sale to different owners, and repeated attempts to purchase her freedom. Speaking of her mother, Dubois recounted how, "On one occasion, when her babe was three days old, [her master] whipped her with an ox-goad, because she didn't hold a hog while he yoked it." Her mother took a long time to recover from the beating and subsequently tried to find someone else to buy her so that she could escape their master's cruel treatment. Her mother's experience and resistance may have provided a kind of model for Dubois's own refusal to accept the terms of slavery as she grew older.⁵⁴⁹

Dubois's mother was purchased by one master after another as she tried to rent her time to purchase her freedom, but Sylvia remained behind as property of the Dubois family. In describing her life with them, Dubois told Larison, "... we got along together pretty well—excepting sometimes I would be a little refractory, and then he would give me a severe flogging."⁵⁵⁰ Dubois described receiving beatings when she was "refractory," "sassy," or "neglectful;" reminding readers that violence was commonplace within slavery, but also suggesting that she refused to submit to some of its terms when she did not fulfill her duties as expected or treat her master

⁵⁴⁸ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 154.

⁵⁴⁹ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 154-155.

⁵⁵⁰ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 155.

and mistress with the deference they demanded.⁵⁵¹ In questioning her, Larison tried to impose his own understanding on her experience, but Dubois pushed back. When Larison asked, “Well, your mistress was always kind to you, wasn’t she?” Dubois retorted, “Kind to me; why she was the very devil himself.”⁵⁵² Latimer tried to solicit testimony to support his preconceived ideas of a benevolent master-slave relationship, but Dubois tossed the assumption aside and spoke in detail about the kinds of violence she suffered as a slave. The fact that she experienced this as a slave in early nineteenth-century New Jersey was a reminder to readers of the North’s complicity in an institution which was almost entirely identified with the South by the time of the book’s publication.

Dubois detailed the temper and violence of her mistress, who she said would “level me with anything she could get hold of—club, stick of wood, tongs, fire-shovel, knife, axe, hatchet; anything that was handiest.” She showed Larison the place on her head that was still depressed from one of the beatings she received in her youth, when her mistress struck her with a fire-shovel and broke her skull.⁵⁵³ Dubois recalled that she was too young to defend herself at first, but the contest of wills continued as she got older and she finally decided not to take it anymore. She told Larison, “But I fixed her—I paid her up for all her spunk. I made up my mind that when I grew up I would do it, and when I had a good chance, when some of her grand company was around, I fixed her. ... I knocked her down, and blamed near

⁵⁵¹ Knowing that her mistress was likely to beat her for any recalcitrance, Dubois noted, “I tell you, if I intended to sass her, I made sure to be off a ways.” Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 161.

⁵⁵² Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 161.

⁵⁵³ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 161-162.

killed her.”⁵⁵⁴ Dubois described how one day her mistress struck her when she wasn’t satisfied with her work and Dubois “squared for a fight.” She hit her so hard that she landed against the door with “a terrible smash,” raising the alarm of onlookers. Dubois recalled,

Why, they [the onlookers] were going to take her part, of course; but I just sat down the slop bucket and straightened up, and smacked my fists at ‘em, and told ‘em to wade in, if they dared, and I’d thrash every devil of ‘em; and there wasn’t a damned one that dared to come.⁵⁵⁵

It’s possible that there is some hyperbole in her description of events, but what matters is that this is how she chose to represent her experience to Larison and readers. Knowing that she cannot remain in that household, her master ultimately agrees to manumit her if she will leave and “go to New Jersey, and stay there.”⁵⁵⁶ Her act of defiance leads to her freedom. Dubois and other women authors of postbellum narratives acknowledged the violence that was part of their experience of slavery and the permanent physical (and psychic) wounds that it inflicted; but they also represented themselves as pushing back against the system and refusing to accept slaveowners’ claim to absolute ownership of and rights over their bodies.

In her narrative, Mattie Jackson also represented herself as refusing to submit to the arbitrary violence of her master. *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* was published in Lawrence, Massachusetts immediately after the Civil War, in 1866. The narrative was written with the assistance of Jackson’s stepmother, Dr. L. S.

⁵⁵⁴ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 162-163.

⁵⁵⁵ Dubois, *Sylvia Dubois*, 163-164.

⁵⁵⁶ Scholar Fulton Minor suggests that Dubois may have had a sexual relationship, and possibly a child, with her master. That might explain his decision to manumit her after this confrontation with his wife. Dubois never speaks to this in the narrative. See Fulton Minor, *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts*, 24.

Thompson. Jackson already had some knowledge of reading and writing, but may have sought her stepmother's assistance because of a lack of confidence in her fledgling writing abilities; as someone who had been living in freedom for some time, L. S. Thompson most likely had more formal education than Jackson.

Thompson's editorial voice is most apparent in the poems that are interspersed throughout the narrative and in the final chapter on "Christianity;" however, the rest of the narrative is told in Mattie's first-person voice and is based on what she shared about her experience.

Mattie's depiction of slavery is one in which masters and mistresses lash out verbally and physically; enslaved people are regularly traded and sold, separating family members in the process; and the threat of sale and degradation of the slave market are used as punishment for resistance, recalcitrance, or self-defense of any kind. She acknowledges the emotional and physical trauma which she and her family experience as a result. However, she also represents the ways that her family resisted slavery's attempts to exercise absolute control over their lives and their bodies. Her father is sold and is to be separated from the family, but her mother helps him escape, in the hopes that they will be rejoined later.⁵⁵⁷ Mattie and her mother remain legally enslaved in St. Louis, Missouri as the Civil War rages around them; but they openly show their support for Lincoln and the Union army and challenge their mistress's faith in the Confederacy.⁵⁵⁸ Some of these acts of

⁵⁵⁷ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 5-7.

⁵⁵⁸ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 9-11.

resistance will be explored further in Section 2 of the chapter, but here I wish to concentrate on Jackson's representation of her response to violence.

Jackson recounts a particular incident when her master beat her repeatedly for being "saucy" and disobedient. When his wife complains that Jackson neglected her duties and was "saucy" when questioned about it, Mr. Lewis strikes Jackson on the head with a piece of wood, creating a deep wound and sending blood rushing down onto her clothing. Lewis demands that Jackson change her clothes immediately, as though he does not want to be reminded of what he has done or of the resistance which led to this violence. When Jackson does not immediately obey, Lewis drags her into another room, throws her to the floor, and begins beating her again. He only stops after Jackson's mother comes to her defense. Powerfully recreating the confrontation, Jackson writes,

I struggled mightily, and stood him a good test for a while, but he was fast conquering me when my mother came. He was aware my mother could usually defend herself against one man, and both of us would overpower him, so after giving his wife strict orders to take me up stairs and keep me there, he took his carriage and drove away.⁵⁵⁹

Mattie represents herself as physically resisting Lewis when he attacks her, and trying to fight back or at least defend herself. Her mother, Ellen Turner, physically intervenes to try to protect her daughter. The comment that Mr. Lewis knew Turner could "usually defend herself against one man" suggests both that violent confrontations happened with some regularity and that Turner regularly resisted them. Following this incident, Jackson resists further by leaving the house and

⁵⁵⁹ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 12.

seeking protection in the Union camp. She writes, "I remained there three weeks, and when I went I wore the same stained clothing as when I was so severely punished, which has left a mark on my head which will ever remind me of my treatment while in slavery."⁵⁶⁰ Wearing that dress like a badge of honor and survival and a marker of slavery's wrongs, Jackson refused to accept that Lewis had a right to treat her this way because she was a slave. In remembering her mother's history of fighting back and her particular efforts to protect her children, Jackson suggested the ways that some enslaved women learned lessons of resistance within their own families.

In her 1868 autobiography, *Behind the Scenes*, Elizabeth Keckley also spoke to the physical, sexual, and psychic violence she experienced as a slave. In describing violent encounters with whites who claimed power over her, Keckley conjured those scenes of abuse for contemporary readers, but also represented herself as refusing to bend to her master's will or tacitly accept the punishments meted out to her. The resistance Keckley shows in these encounters becomes fundamental to her identity and her insistence on demonstrating her own worth, morality, and trustworthiness despite the degrading labels which whites attached to her and her status as a slave. Of all the women's postbellum narratives, Keckley's received the most public attention due to her relationship with the Lincoln family. Most contemporary reviewers and many subsequent scholars have focused on what Keckley reveals about the Lincoln household, but the story she told about her experience in slavery mattered, despite being relegated to a smaller number of

⁵⁶⁰ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 13.

pages in the book. Deeply concerned with her image and how she was perceived by others, Keckley chose to write about her days in slavery and incorporated the resistance and industry she showed under it into her overall identity.⁵⁶¹

In a chapter entitled “Girlhood and Its Sorrows,” Keckley wrote about her experience of physical violence and sexual exploitation in her teenage years. Keckley recreates the scenes in which she was beaten by her master and Mr. Bingham, a member of the master’s church who was charged with “breaking” Keckley of her pride. She not only describes the violence of these encounters, but the way that she questioned whites’ reason for and authority to beat her. When Bingham takes her to the study, says he intends to whip her, and orders her to pull down her dress, Keckley replied, “No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger. Nobody has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it.” Keckley describes a physical struggle in which she “resisted with all my strength,” but was ultimately overpowered by Bingham, who tied her hands, ripped down her dress, and beat her with a cowhide until “blood trickled down [her] back.” Keckley describes the abuse done to her, but also her refusal to let it accomplish the

⁵⁶¹ At the time of her book’s publication, many reviewers gave little attention to Keckley’s writing about her slave life and assumed that she wrote the book primarily to tell the Lincolns’ secrets. It is worth noting, therefore, that in an 1893 interview, Keckley placed as much emphasis on re-telling her memories of slavery as she did on recalling her time in the White House. In fact, the author presented Keckley’s life in slavery as the primary reason she wrote the narrative. He writes, “it had been the dream of Lizzie Keckley to some day write a book and tell the stories of her wrongs, when a slave girl, and she had threatened then that if she ever learned to write she would write a book, telling the world just how brutal her masters had been. She kept the threat, and the book caused a sickening sensation among the proud Burwells, who had never dreamed that a former slave would publicly bring them into condemnation for brutality.” See “Mrs. Lincoln’s Modiste: Now Instructor in Sewing at Wilberforce University,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, Arkansas), July 23, 1893.

goal of breaking her. Describing the terrible blows and the “excruciating agony” she felt, Keckley writes, “I did not scream; I was too proud to let my tormentor know that I was suffering. I closed my lips firmly, that not even a groan might escape from them, and I stood like a statue while the keen lash cut deep into my flesh.”⁵⁶²

When she is let go, she goes to her master and demands to know why she was beaten. He brushes her off, but she writes, “I would not be put off thus. ‘What have I done? I will know why I have been flogged.’” Keckley’s demand angers her master, who strikes her with a chair, and she creeps to her room, where she felt that her “spirit rebelled against the unjustness that had been inflicted upon me.” Still not broken, Keckley faces Bingham again the following week. She writes,

On entering the room I found him prepared with a new rope and a new cowhide. I told him that I was ready to die, but that he would not conquer me. In struggling with him I bit his finger severely, when he seized a heavy stick and beat me with it in a shameful manner. Again I went home sore and bleeding, but with pride as strong and defiant as ever.⁵⁶³

Keckley describes coming to blows with Bingham a third time and with her master twice more; both times she struggles against them, but is eventually overcome – but the end result is that, looking at her bleeding form, Bingham and her master repent and promise to never strike her again. She concludes her discussion by saying, “These revolting scenes created a great sensation at the time, were the talk of the town and neighborhood, and I flatter myself that the actions of those who had conspired against me were not viewed in a light to reflect credit upon them.” In recreating those bloody scenes for the reader, Keckley again succeeds in putting the

⁵⁶² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 32-34.

⁵⁶³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 34-37.

men's actions in a negative light – she depicts them as violent and cruel, physically overpowering her, lashing out without reason, and doing all of this seemingly without justification. In contrast, she paints herself as having done nothing to “deserve” punishment, and as physically tormented by men stronger than herself. But she simultaneously represents herself as something more or other than a victim – she fights back; she tells her pain to the reader but refuses to let her tormentors know how much they are hurting her; she walks away from every encounter; and ultimately, it is suggested, she overcomes their violence – her fighting back, her refusal to submit, the image of the violence she is suffering – all work to overcome their own wills to exert their mastery over her in this way. The fact that she gives no real explanation for these men's change of heart suggests the ways that they had no justification to begin with.⁵⁶⁴

In the same chapter, Keckley writes briefly about her sexual exploitation by a white man who pursued her for four years and eventually was the biological father of her son. Keckley talks about this “persecution” much more briefly and in far less detail, telling readers that she does “not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain.” She says only

that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother. ... If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 37-38.

⁵⁶⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 38-39.

Later, she writes that she was reluctant to accept the proposal of Mr. Keckley because she “could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery—of adding one single recruit to the millions bound to hopeless servitude, fettered and shackled with chains stronger and heavier than manacles of iron.” She felt the enslavement of her son was particularly galling given his biracial status – why did one blood win out over the other, in determining his status? She writes, “By the laws of God and nature, as interpreted by man, one-half of my boy was free, and why should not this fair birthright of freedom remove the curse from the other half—raise it into the bright, joyous sunshine of liberty?”⁵⁶⁶

The minimal attention which Keckley gives to her sexual exploitation by the unnamed man and the son that came out of their relationship seems to be another act of self-protection. She maintains her pride and her dignity by not revealing the details of a struggle that she ultimately lost. Her son stands in as evidence of the sexual violence she does not describe – a child whom she maintains that she never wished to bring into the world, but nonetheless loves. For Keckley, discussing the details of the exploitation risks her pride and reputation as much as it would have to show the pain she felt being whipped. William and Ellen Craft wrote about choosing not to marry or have children while they were still slaves because they did not want to bring a child into slavery.⁵⁶⁷ Keckley is unable to prevent that when she is a young woman, but she exercises control and choice later in her life when the question arises of marrying again. She still does not want to bring a child into

⁵⁶⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 46-47.

⁵⁶⁷ Craft, *Running*, 1-2, 27.

slavery.⁵⁶⁸ Like Harriet Jacobs and other women writers, Keckley reminds the reader that one of the travesties of slavery was the mixed meaning it gave to motherhood, turning what might have been a choice and a blessing into a memory of violation and a reminder of continued servitude.

The male authors of postbellum slave narratives also remembered and wrote about the traumas endured under slavery, including repeated sales, family separation, overwork, cruelty and violence. Because this section of the chapter has primarily focused on how enslaved women wrote about their response and resistance to physical violence, my discussion of the 13 men's narratives examined for this study will also concentrate on how male authors represented violence and resistance to it; obviously both enslaved men and women engaged in diverse acts of resistance that went beyond this. Violence and resistance under slavery emerge as important themes for some of the male writers, but not all. As was true with the women's narratives, a few of the male authors do not engage with memories of violence or resistance at all, perhaps because of their young age at the time of emancipation (and thus limited experience and memory of slavery), or the publication's focus on something other than the author's experience of slavery.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 46-47.

⁵⁶⁹ For example, Norvel Blair, Robert Anderson, Henry Jeter, Jared Maurice Arter, and Thomas Burton give virtually no attention to violence under slavery, or to slaves' resistance in their narratives. This is the case for Norvel Blair because his narrative is overwhelmingly devoted to his post-war experience of being cheated out of money and property by Republicans in the South; he writes only a few sentences about having been a slave before he shifts to his post-emancipation story. Thomas Burton does not address these themes because he is only 4-5 years old at the time of emancipation and remembers very little about slavery. Although he gives more attention to that period of time than Blair, the bulk of his narrative naturally focuses on his life in freedom.

Other male writers included examples of some violence and whippings under slavery, but did not engage with these instances at length and/or in an explicitly antislavery manner; and gave limited to no attention to slaves' resistance.⁵⁷⁰ Lewis Charlton and William Walker write in detail about the brutality that they and other slaves experienced under slavery, but represent few to no examples of slave resistance.⁵⁷¹ Resistance to physical violence only emerges as a more significant theme for two of the male narrators in this sample: William Parker and Harry Smith.

⁵⁷⁰ This category – narrators who gave some attention to violence, but for whom violence and/or resistance were not central – is more subjective and difficult to define. I would argue that Francis Frederick, Booker T. Washington, William Wells Brown, and Thomas Johnson fall into this category. Despite his limited attention to slavery and his claim that that he “was too young to experience much of its hardships,” Washington vividly recalled the scene of his uncle tied to a tree, stripped naked, and whipped with a cowhide as he cried for mercy. Washington, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Life and Work*, 18-19. This is his only significant mention of slave owners' violence and he does not provide any examples of slave resistance. It is, nonetheless, a significant memory for him. In *My Southern Home*, William Wells Brown makes several mentions of slaves being whipped, but only in passing and without critique. At one point he even argues that “CRUELTY to negroes was not practised [*sic*] in our section” and “a certain degree of punishment was actually needed to insure respect to the master, and good government to the slave population.” Brown gives little attention to slave resistance of any kind. Francis Frederick writes about being whipped by whites and members of his own family, for misbehaving as a child. Many of these incidents are represented as punishment for his humorous childhood antics. Frederick comments that he learned to appreciate the difference between the beatings he received from his family and those doled out by whites and he does mention a few instances of more extreme violence, but most of the specific examples he gives of being whipped by whites represent it as punishment for his childhood antics and a conclusion to a humorous tale about what he got up to. Thomas Johnson's narrative is arguably the most “anti-slavery” in tone of these four. He refers, in less graphic terms than some, to physical violence and the threat of it several times, but it is not a major theme; he gives no examples of slave resistance. Brown, *My Southern Home*, 12-14, 24-27, 82, 91; Frederick, *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick*, 6-7, 10-12, 14-15, 32; Johnson, *Africa for Christ*, 11, 13-15, 19.

⁵⁷¹ Lewis Charlton's short narrative is full of references to the violence and brutality of slavery, indicting both masters and mistresses for their cruelty. Charlton writes about the “bloody scenes of slavery” in more general terms, as well as specific memories of whippings and cruel treatment he received himself. It is a deeply antislavery work in which Charlton tells the reader, “There is not room enough on the broad expanse of the blue heavens to begin to paint and portray the horrors, the iniquity and enormity of that black, accursed, and damning system of slavery.” Charlton does not write about resistance by himself or other slaves, further contributing to the image he creates of slavery's toll on black lives. William Walker also gives significant attention to the violence he experienced and witnessed under slavery in his narrative. Like Charlton, and many other former slaves, Walker echoed the sentiment that “the half cannot be told,” in terms of acknowledging all the terrible things that masters and mistresses did. Walker makes multiple escape attempts, but does not represent himself resisting in other ways. However, he does recall a vivid scene in which another enslaved man attacked and killed his master after enduring terrible beatings and seeing his wife and child sold away. Although the offending man was eventually convicted and hanged, Walker describes

Perhaps not surprisingly, Parker and Smith both highlight examples of male, rather than female, slave resistance. Parker very much emerges as the independent male hero in his narrative and he describes himself as engaged in a manly battle against slaves' oppressors both before and after he gains his freedom. Writing about the way he learned to fend for himself in the slave quarters as an orphaned child, Parker recalled, "The experience of my boyhood has since been repeated in my manhood. My rights at the fireplace were won by my child-fists; my rights as a freeman were, under God, secured by my own right arm."⁵⁷² Walker looked for an opportunity to escape from a young age and described his growing dissatisfaction with the terms of slavery as he got older; he began to actually look for a chance at some confrontation with his master that would allow him to assert his freedom once and for all. When he refuses to go out to the field with the other slaves one day, his master comes after him and they engage in a physical struggle that leaves his master prostrate and injured. Walker seizes this chance to run, calling to his brother to join him as he goes.⁵⁷³ Once he is established in the free state of Pennsylvania, he becomes active in assisting fugitive slaves and describes violent exchanges and confrontations with slave catchers that unfold over the years. His representation of

how the man's back was exposed for the jury in order to show them what violence had incited him to action; he portrays it as an extreme example of both slaveowners' violence and a slave's refusal to accept it. Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton*, 1-6; Walker, *Buried Alive*, 16-18, 26-29.

⁵⁷² Parker, *The Freedman's Story*, 154.

⁵⁷³ In addition to his own resistance, Parker does briefly mention an incident of an enslaved woman resisting physical punishment. He describes how his mistress ordered the overseer to whip a slave she was dissatisfied with, the woman refused to be whipped, and the beating was that much more violent when she was finally overpowered. Parker, *The Freedman's Story*, 154-158.

the Underground Railroad is also dominated by the actions and bravery of African American men.⁵⁷⁴

Violence and slave resistance are central themes in the narrative of Harry Smith. His memoir is striking in that he describes such terrible acts of violence, but also repeatedly gives examples of slaves who violently resisted.⁵⁷⁵ Smith was hired out to different individuals over the course of many years and thus was familiar with a greater number of whites in positions of authority, as well as a greater number of slaves living under different circumstances. Smith does describe one incident in which he knowingly disobeys his employer and resists being punished for it the next day; he grabs a knife to defend himself, runs for the door, knocks over his master and another man, and runs back to his actual owner.⁵⁷⁶ He describes in detail five other incidents in which slaves physically resisted violence and punishment; all five of the actors are men.⁵⁷⁷

What this survey of selected men's narratives reveals is that women's postbellum narratives are telling a different and critical story about how some enslaved women experienced and responded to physical and sexual violence.

⁵⁷⁴ When he later recounts his Underground Railroad activities, he mentions his wife taking action to assist in a dangerous situation, but says virtually nothing else about her involvement in this work, despite the fact that fugitives would have often sought refuge at the house that they shared. His wife may have participated in that work on the same level as Amanda Smith's mother, but we get a very different impression of it when the action is described from the male perspective. Parker, *The Freedman's Story*, 161-166, 276-288.

⁵⁷⁵ For examples of Smith's descriptions of violence, as well as slaves' resistance, see Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 10, 12-13, 16-24, 30, 41, 51-52, 61-64, 86-95, 114-115, 128-130, 133-139.

⁵⁷⁶ Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 84-85.

⁵⁷⁷ Smith gives the following specific examples of slave men who resisted physical violence: He writes about an enslaved man who resisted being whipped when caught by slave patrollers; a male slave who takes the whip from his master while he is being beaten and uses it on him; a master who was murdered by several male slaves after repeatedly forcing one of their wives to have sex with him in her husband's presence; and another two male slaves who were particularly strong and often resisted punishment. Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 22-24, 114-115, 128-130, 133-135, 137-139.

Telling one's own story, vs. being written *about*, makes a fundamental difference. This does not discount the violence against enslaved women that male authors were witness to, the significance of their testimony on that shared experience, or the significant impact that seeing their mothers, other female relatives, and other enslaved women beaten must have made on them. But imagine, if you will, how the story might have been different if Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester had written about that experience from her own perspective. Did she, like Elizabeth Keckley, wish that she could stifle her cries and rob her tormenter of the satisfaction of knowing how much he hurt her? Douglass describes only what was done to her – the actions of his master; not any response or reaction on her part. But it seems unlikely that she remained completely silent and passive during this entire exchange. Did he strip the dress from her back because she refused to take it down? When he had ripped it away from her, did she still try to cover herself? Did she hit him, trying to defend herself and get him to let go? Did she pull at the rope he wrapped around her wrists, or try to get away from him as he made her get up on a stool and hung her from a hook in the ceiling? Would his Aunt Hester, an adult woman, have remembered the details differently than Douglass's child-self did, hiding in the closet out of fear? We do not have her account. But we do know how the formerly enslaved women who succeeded in writing their narratives after the Civil War remembered those experiences. We are reminded that perspective matters absolutely and that when talked about second-hand, we do not learn so much about women's experience of violence as we do about the writer's experience of witnessing it. Women's postbellum slave narratives perform critical work in

remembering not only the violence done to women in slavery, but also the ways that they sometimes challenged whites' rights to enact that violence, rejecting both the physical assault and the master/slave dichotomy which justified it.

“Struggles for Freedom:” New Narratives of Self-Emancipation

The first section of this chapter examined the ways that post-bellum women authors represented their experience of and resistance to slavery, pointing to the traumas they endured and the inhumanity of their masters and mistresses, as well as their own steadfast resolve to push back against the system and carve out some autonomy whenever possible. These individual struggles were part of a longer and broader struggle for full freedom and emancipation. Of the 13 women's slave narratives published after the Civil War, approximately half of the authors gained freedom in the antebellum era and half in the course of the war itself. In both scenarios, all but two of the authors describe gaining freedom through acts of self-emancipation that often involved other family members.⁵⁷⁸ For example, Elizabeth Keckley purchased her freedom and that of her son; Susie King Taylor ran to Union lines with her uncle and other family members during the Civil War; and Annie

⁵⁷⁸ The two narratives which fall outside the definition of self-emancipation are those of Millie-Christine and Bethany Veney. In the case of Millie-Christine, the sisters gain their legal freedom at the end of the Civil War, but they remain with the same family that owned them and make no attempt to assert their independence. Bethany Veney's freedom is purchased by an outside party when she is under threat of sale due to her owner's debt; it is worth noting, however, that this outside party interrupts and initially interferes with Veney's own plans to run away rather than risk being sold away from her son. Millie-Christine, *History of the Carolina Twins*, 15-16; Veney, *Narrative of Bethany Veney*, 35-36.

Burton was freed by her mother, who returned to her former owners' plantation at the end of the war and fought for the return of her children.

Stories of escape and freedom were part and parcel of the antebellum slave narratives, but those overwhelmingly male-authored stories were almost always about individuals striking out on their own, feeding into the image of the independent male hero that Frederick Douglass so epitomized. When a larger number of women seized the opportunity to write about their lives and their escapes from slavery in the postbellum era, they created a different representation of the quest for freedom – one which showed the heroism of women and mothers and drew attention to the ways that families often negotiated freedom together, sometimes in a protracted struggle rather than a single, dramatic escape.⁵⁷⁹ This section of the chapter provides a closer analysis of the “escape stories” written by Lucy Delaney, Amanda Smith, Mattie Jackson, and Kate Drumgoold. Writing about how their families gained freedom between the late 1830s and 1865, these women reminded the reading public that African Americans had been fighting for their freedom and the integrity of their families long before the Civil War; and that, rather than being helpless victims, enslaved women were central to efforts to secure

⁵⁷⁹ Eric Foner's recent work on the Underground Railroad confirms that most fugitives were young men who escaped alone. However, his study also helps us see that, despite being a numerical minority, a significant number of the fugitives he traces to New York City were women and children. In the Record of Fugitives which abolitionist Sydney Howard Gay kept for 1855-1856, he recorded the arrival of over 200 fugitives. 137 of them were men, but 44 were women, 29 were children, and 4 were “other” adults (sex unspecified). Out of this total of 214, women represented almost 21% and women and children together (children most often escaped with women) represented 34%. Numbers like this remind us that women's voices and experiences, both in terms of slavery and their escapes, are especially underrepresented in the antebellum slave narratives. Foner notes that most of the women in Gay's records were either unmarried or escaped with their children; it was less common for women to leave children behind. In his discussion of individual fugitives' cases, Foner often includes examples of women and families that escaped and, in the process, changes our picture of the typical “runaway.” Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 5, 108, 117, 141, 152-158, 161, 193, 200-203.

freedom for themselves and their family members before and during the war. In telling their personal histories, many of these authors also spoke to a larger, public memory of northern resistance to slavery and increasing sectional strife, implicitly reminding readers that slavery was the central cause of Southern rebellion and the Civil War. While references to the sectional conflict and slaves' quest for freedom often acknowledged some white northerners and Union soldiers as sympathetic allies, women's narratives emphasized the ways that the enslaved won freedom for themselves.

In writing her autobiography, Lucy Delaney represented her family's struggle for freedom as the central story in her life. The bulk of her narrative recounts the multiple and ongoing "Struggles for Freedom" that the family engaged in, as she, her sister Nancy, and her mother, Polly Wash, each gained freedom separately in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Delaney's sister, Nancy, is the first to successfully escape by fleeing to Canada when she accompanied her owners on their honeymoon travels in the North. Later, Delaney's mother is sold and initiates a freedom suit based on her extended residence in a free state years earlier. Finally, Delaney runs away to seek her mother's help when she believes she is about to be sold; when her master finds her, Lucy's mother brings a suit for her daughter's freedom, which is granted after a lengthy, 18-month trial. In contrast to the individual escape normally depicted in the antebellum slave narrative, Delaney's recounting of their "escapes" shows the ways that families sometimes negotiated freedom together and engaged in a calculated struggle that might take several years to win.

Before analyzing the way that Delaney narrates her family's freedom struggles, it is important to acknowledge that her representation is sometimes contradicted by the historical record. Delaney and her mother both gain freedom through the court, bringing freedom suits based on the denial of their legal claim to liberty. Legal scholar Lea VanderVelde's recent work on freedom suits in St. Louis, Missouri reveals that Delaney's account of events does not match some of the facts established by testimony in her mother's freedom suit. In her narrative, Delaney depicts her mother as living a carefree childhood on the banks of the Ohio River, until she was rudely kidnapped, along with other blacks, taken south, and sold into slavery. Delaney never explicitly says that her mother was born free, but in not addressing her status as a child, this is certainly suggested to the reader. The court record, however, reveals that Polly was born a slave in Kentucky; she travelled to Illinois with her master, David Crocket, when she was in her teens. Although slavery was still legally practiced in the state, Illinois law prohibited the introduction of new slaves into the state; slaveowners had the right to bring slaves into the state temporarily for up to 90 days, but not to permanently reside there with them. The Crocket family remained in Illinois, with Polly, for over one year; she was legally entitled to her freedom, but she remained in Crocket's household and under his control. Rather than being kidnapped and sold into slavery, she was taken to Missouri by her master's son and later sold by the Crocket family.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁸⁰ The court records establish that Polly Wash was born a slave to the Beatty family in Kentucky in 1803, and was later purchased by Joseph Crocket. When she was fourteen or fifteen years old, the Crocket family moved to Madison County, Illinois and took Polly with them. Slavery remained legal in Illinois at the time because the Northwest Ordinance's antislavery clause was interpreted as not applying to slaves who were already residents in Illinois territory at the time of its enactment. However, Illinois's 1818 constitution did prohibit the further introduction of slaves into the state.

The legal record and Delaney's narrative also differ in another important way. In describing what led up to her mother's freedom suit, Delaney writes that her mother ran away in order to avoid being sold, made it all the way to Chicago while all the time being pursued by slave hunters, and caused a great uproar in that city when the citizens witnessed slave hunters trying to catch her. Delaney writes that her mother chose to return with the men out of fear that retribution would be taken on her daughter. When she returns, she decides to pursue a legal remedy and brings a suit for her freedom. What actually happened is less certain. Polly was sold after a confrontation with her mistress, but in her affidavit she makes no mention of running away. Rather, she said that with her new master's permission, she became a chambermaid on a steamboat that travelled the Illinois Rivers. It is possible that she travelled to Chicago, but she makes no mention of that. Nor do we learn anything about how or why she ultimately returned to Missouri and decided to initiate the freedom suit. Although VanderVelde seems to assume that the entire story about Polly's escape is fabricated, literary scholar Eric Gardner found evidence that suggests there may actually have been an escape attempt. Gardner found court records that suggest that Polly Wash "was involved in an altercation before filing her

Slaveowners who entered Illinois with their slaves had a right of transit for up to 90 days, as long as they did not intend to permanently reside in the state with their slaves. Illinois allowed for long-term (sometimes life-long) indentures, which offered a legal alternative to slave owners who brought slaves into the state and decided to remain. Polly Wash's owner, Joseph Crocket, was aware of the legal situation, but did not act to indenture Polly; thus, her residence in Illinois for over one year meant that she was legally entitled to her freedom. Crocket's son took Polly to Missouri, after suggesting that the family could take her out of state every 90 days in order to avoid the law. Ultimately, Crocket decided to keep Polly in Missouri permanently and eventually sold her after the family moved back to Missouri themselves. See VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs*, 146-148. On Illinois slave law, see Don E. Fehrenbacher and Ward M. McAfee, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 254-258; Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 15-18.

suit. The St. Louis Circuit Court's index to criminal proceedings for 1838-1842 notes a request to indict a Polly Wash for 'attempt to kill' (np) [*sic*]." The record book that the index refers to is missing and no case file was found; given that the index refers to proceedings on only one page in the record book, Gardner thinks it likely that the indictment was not pursued any further. "But," he writes, "the question that must arise from this entry is: did Polly Wash use physical force in an escape attempt?"⁵⁸¹ Ultimately, it remains unclear whether Wash made an escape attempt prior to suing for her freedom and, if so, what the circumstances were surrounding it.

What are we to make of these divergent details? It is difficult to know.

Writing in 1891, Delaney was dependent on her memories of what her mother told her about her early life, her claim to freedom, and her experience after being sold away from the Berry family. We have no way of knowing what Polly Wash told her daughter or how it was construed. Most of what Delaney tells us about her mother's experience appears in her description of her own freedom suit, as she recreates the arguments her lawyer made regarding Delaney's right to freedom based on her mother's case. Unfortunately the transcript for Delaney's freedom suit is not extant, so we have no way of knowing whether what was actually said at the trial, regarding her mother, matches what Delaney wrote in her 1890s narrative; that information might at least give us some sense of what Delaney knew at the time. VanderVelde suggests that Wash may have told her daughter a different story about her time in Illinois, possibly to inspire her or give her a greater sense of her rightful claim to

⁵⁸¹ Eric Gardner, "'You have no business to whip me': The Freedom Suits of Polly Wash and Lucy Ann Delaney," *African American Review* 41, no. 1 (2007), 35.

freedom. At the same time, it is possible that Delaney herself changed the details of her mother's story in order to give the *reader* a sense that an even greater wrong was committed – the kidnapping and enslavement of a free-born woman might seem even more unjust than the failure to respect a slave's legal right to freedom under a free state's residency laws.⁵⁸² In many cases with the slave narratives, we have only the author's representation of events. It is impossible to say for certain what lay behind the discrepancies between the two stories. This chapter is more concerned with the significance of how Delaney chose to *represent* her family's story in her narrative, than with the fact that those representations are sometimes factually inaccurate for reasons we can't explain.

Delaney represents her mother as a heroic figure, instrumental in helping both of her daughters gain freedom and instilling in them the belief in their absolute *right* to it, as well.⁵⁸³ Delaney writes, "When my father was sold south, my mother registered a solemn vow that her children should not continue in slavery all their lives, and she never spared an opportunity to impress it upon us, that we must get our freedom whenever the chance offered."⁵⁸⁴ Polly Wash encourages her daughter, Nancy, to seize the opportunity offered by the white family's honeymoon travels in the North; she offers what knowledge she has of the region and provides Nancy with a contact in Canada who can help her after she arrives. Delaney remembered that her mother was overjoyed when she learned of Nancy's successful escape and

⁵⁸² VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs*, 145-146.

⁵⁸³ The reader may recall, from the previous section, Delaney's resistance to her white mistress's attempts to define her and treat her as a slave. Her mother had spoken so often of their right to freedom, based on her legal freedom at birth that Delaney tensed at having that label forced on her, despite being raised in the system.

⁵⁸⁴ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 84-85.

became even more determined that she and Delaney would gain their freedom too. Raised in the spirit of liberty, Delaney recalled, “I was beginning to plan for freedom, and was forever on alert for a chance to escape and join my sister. I was then twelve years old, and often talked the matter over with mother and canvassed the probabilities of both of us getting away. No schemes were too wild for us to consider!”⁵⁸⁵

In Delaney’s retelling, it is Wash’s fear of being permanently separated from her daughter that forces her to pursue her own freedom first; she runs away rather than be sold after an argument with her mistress. Appealing quite explicitly to public memories of sectional tension over the Fugitive Slave Law, Delaney depicts her mother as being on the run for several weeks before being found by slave hunters in the city of Chicago:

At this time the Fugitive Slave Law was in full operation, and it was against the law of the whole country to aid and protect an escaped slave; not even a drink of water, for the love of the Master, might be given, and those who dared to do it (and there were many such brave hearts, thank God!) placed their lives in danger. ... The presence of bloodhounds and ‘nigger-catchers’ in their midst, created great excitement and scandalized the community. Feeling ran high and hundreds of people gathered together and declared that mother should not be returned to slavery; but fearing that Mr. Cox would wreak his vengeance upon me, my mother finally gave herself up to her captors, and returned to St. Louis.

The escape Delaney describes would have taken place more than a decade before the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was passed as part of the Missouri Compromise, when the country was operating under the somewhat less stringent Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Nonetheless, Delaney’s reference to the “Fugitive Slave Law” likely called up

⁵⁸⁵ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 86.

associations with the North's more dramatic and organized resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law of the 1850s. Delaney's strategic description of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Chicago community's opposition to the spectacle of her mother being hunted there, the punishments which came to people who dared to help a fugitive, and the risk which good Northern souls nonetheless took to help fugitives, all worked to create an image of the South as an aggressor, drew attention to the inhumanity of slavery, and called up an older history of resistance in which the hunted fugitive and brave-hearted Northerner fought together against their mutual oppressor.⁵⁸⁶ The fact that the legal record suggests that events did not unfold this way does not change the significance of Delaney's representation or what it would have signified for contemporary readers.

Although Delaney taps into the memory of northern whites' resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, she ultimately represents her mother – not sympathetic whites – as the one taking decisive action. In Delaney's retelling, a crowd gathers to protest Wash's return to slavery, but Polly Wash herself diffuses the situation by *choosing* to “g[i]ve herself up to her captors,” rather than risk Delaney being punished in her

⁵⁸⁶ Literary scholar Eric Gardner notes, Delaney's re-telling may “collapse her mother's escape and infamous later fugitive slave trials (including Shadrach Minkins and Anthony Burns).” There is no way to know whether that collapse was intentional. Of course, Lea VanderVelde's more recent research suggests that the escape Delaney describes may not have happened at all. VanderVelde further posits that Delaney's description of a public outcry in Chicago over a hunted fugitive in their midst seems unlikely given public sentiment in 1839; she can imagine it happening in 1850s, but not in 1839. Although the escape and public response may be a fabrication, and although readers probably did associate the fugitive slave issue with the 1850s, it is worth noting that Northern resistance to the fugitive slave law predated the 1850s. African Americans and white abolitionists were not only assisting, but also publicizing the experience of fugitive slaves and kidnap victims as early as the 1830s. Delaney's recreation of this dramatic scene, therefore, called back to a much longer history of Northern resistance to slavery. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 87. Gardner, “You have no business to whip me”; VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs*, 150-151. For more about the longer history of African American and abolitionist resistance to the capture of fugitive slaves, see Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*.

absence. Rather than gain her freedom under these circumstances, Wash returns to Missouri and decides to sue for her freedom in court. Delaney gives minimal attention to her mother's trial at this point in the narrative, but recalls that Wash found a good lawyer and gathered enough testimony to convince the jury "that she was a free woman."⁵⁸⁷ In Delaney's retelling, Wash does not wait to be rescued in Chicago or after her return to St. Louis; she seeks out legal counsel and gathers the necessary witnesses to secure her freedom legally and permanently. When Delaney later runs to her mother for help, Polly Wash initiates a suit for her daughter's freedom and enlists the services of a well-known lawyer for Delaney's case.⁵⁸⁸

Delaney uses the rendition of her own trial and escape from slavery as an opportunity to underline the antislavery message that runs throughout her autobiography. Earlier in the narrative, Delaney describes her mistress's husband as a reluctant slave owner who came into human property via his marriage, but told his wife that he did not "believe in slavery," or in whipping "servants."⁵⁸⁹ However, when Delaney and Wash defy his authority by running away and suing for freedom in court, Mr. Mitchell insisted that Delaney be remanded to jail until the case was resolved; she remained there for the next eighteen months. Delaney represents this man who previously expressed antislavery sentiments as corrupted by the

⁵⁸⁷ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 88.

⁵⁸⁸ The circumstances differ, but ultimately the legal record also represents Polly Wash as taking decisive action to gain her freedom. She decides to sue for her freedom, finds a lawyer to assist her, and accompanies him when he deposes witnesses for the case. When Delaney later runs to her mother for help, Wash again takes action, finding a lawyer to sue for her daughter's freedom. This action is even more remarkable because at the time that Lucy's freedom suit was filed, Polly Wash's suit had not yet been decided; with her own freedom not yet legally secure, Wash convinced a lawyer to sue for Lucy's freedom on the basis of her own illegal enslavement. VanderVelde, *Redemption Songs*, 151-154; Gardner, "You have no business to whip me," 38-39.

⁵⁸⁹ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 89-90.

institution and determined to punish her, when her “only crime was seeking for that freedom which was my birthright!” She writes, “I had heard Mr. Mitchell tell his wife that he did not believe in slavery; yet, through his instrumentality, I was shut away from the sunlight, because he was determined to prove me a slave, and thus keep me in bondage.”⁵⁹⁰ Delaney goes on to describe the closing arguments made by lawyers on both sides. While she speaks only in broad terms about the “dreadful things” Mr. Mitchell’s lawyer told the jury about her over an hour’s time, she gives specific detail and language to the arguments made by her lawyer, Judge Bates, on her behalf. Recreating the courtroom scene for her contemporary readers, Delaney details how Bates “*chained* his hearers” [author emphasis]

... with the graphic history of my mother’s life, from the time she played on Illinois banks, through her trials in slavery, her separation from her husband, her efforts to become free, her voluntary return to slavery for the sake of her child, Lucy, and her subsequent efforts in securing her own freedom. All these incidents he lingered over step by step, and concluding, he said: ... ‘Gentlemen of the jury, I am a slave-holder myself, but thanks to the Almighty God, I am above the base principle of holding anybody a slave that has a good right to her freedom as this girl has been proven to have; she was free before she was born; her mother was free, but kidnapped in her youth, and sacrificed to the greed of negro traders, and no free woman can give birth to a slave child, as it is in direct violation of the laws of God and man!’⁵⁹¹

Delaney effectively chains *her* readers with this dramatic rendering of Bates’ closing arguments, reminding them of the arbitrary nature of the lines that were drawn to justify racial slavery – and of African Americans’ determination to fight for freedom at all costs.

⁵⁹⁰ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 92.

⁵⁹¹ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 95.

Like many of the other women authors of postbellum slave narratives, Delaney's freedom story is deeply tied to family. Delaney not only represents her own independence and struggle, but that of her sister and mother, as well; these other two women who did not write autobiographies themselves nonetheless had their stories told and were depicted as heroes in their own narratives of self-emancipation. Delaney's recreation of scenes that she was not personally witness to suggests that she relied on Nancy and her mother's testimony for parts of the narrative, thereby making them partners in its writing and production.⁵⁹² Rather than the classic "I was born" statement, Delaney opens the book with a description of her mother's imagined freedom in Illinois, abruptly brought to an end by her supposed kidnapping and transport to a slave state. In this way, Delaney makes a rhetorical claim to her own birthright to freedom (as the child of a woman who was legally free), but also intimates that this narrative is as much her mother's as it is her own. A significant portion of the narrative is devoted to Polly Wash's own experience, determination, and multiple attempts to gain freedom for herself and her daughters. Even in remembering the scenes of the freedom suit which emancipated her, Delaney rehearses the drama of her mother's trials more than her own. Delaney's sister, Nancy, receives less sustained attention, but Delaney is careful to tell *her* story too. In fact, after writing about Nancy's flight to Canada from

⁵⁹² A similar argument has been made regarding Ellen Craft's contributions to *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Both Ellen and William are listed as authors, but the fact that the narrative is told entirely in William's first-person voice led some critics to question Ellen's level of involvement in writing the book. Literature scholar Charles A. Heglar argues that the fact that the narrative reconstructs scenes and dialogue that William was not present to witness is evidence that Ellen contributed to the book's authorship. See Heglar, "The Narrative of Collaboration: Slave Marriage and William and Ellen Craft," in *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 79-108.

Niagara Falls, Delaney includes a paragraph written in her sister's first-person voice, adding details to the story of her escape. Given the fact that the sisters reconnected in later years, it seems likely that Nancy actually contributed this text to the book; Delaney's inclusion of it allowed Nancy to testify directly.⁵⁹³ In placing family at the center of these narratives of slavery and freedom, female authors of postbellum narratives engaged in a kind of recovery work, freeing the lives and experiences of other enslaved women from the dustbin of history and preserving those memories for future generations.⁵⁹⁴

Although they are all living as free people by the early 1840s, Delaney connects her family's experience of slavery to the larger institution and the wrongs that were finally righted over the course of the Civil War some twenty years later.⁵⁹⁵ She dedicates her book to the Grand Army of the Republic and "those who by their valor have made their name immortal, from whom we are daily learning the lessons of patriotism, in whom we respect the virtues of charity, patience and friendship as

⁵⁹³ Lucy writes that after she and her mother were both free, they immediately set to work saving money so that her mother could travel to Canada to visit Nancy, "the long-lost girl." After her mother's death, Lucy succeeds in locating and getting in touch with her father, whom none of them have seen since he was sold away 45 years earlier. She notes that Nancy came from Canada to see him when he came to visit; this would have been sometime in the 1880s. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 99-103.

⁵⁹⁴ The narratives of Elizabeth Keckley and Mattie Jackson also do the work of documenting and memorializing the lives of other family members. Keckley recounts her parents' separation and her mother's particular anguish in detail and also includes the text of one of the letters her father wrote home after their separation. Mattie Jackson's narrative is as much her mother's as it is her own; she recounts multiple experiences and events from her mother's perspective.

⁵⁹⁵ This connection of her family's antebellum struggle to the later battle of the Civil War is evident when Delaney remembers her emotional reaction to her father's sale. Looking back, she exclaims, "Slavery! cursed slavery! what crimes has it invoked! and, oh! what retribution has a righteous God visited upon these traders in human flesh! The rivers of tears shed by us helpless ones, in captivity, were turned to lakes of blood! How often have we cried in our anguish, 'Oh! Lord, how long, how long?' But the handwriting was on the wall, and tardy justice came at last and avenged the woes of an oppressed race! Chickamauga, Shiloh, Atlanta and Gettysburgh [*sic*], spoke in thunder tones! ..." Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, 84.

displayed towards the colored race.”⁵⁹⁶ While she makes a rhetorical connection to the memory of the Civil War and Union soldiers’ sacrifice in the name of freedom, the details of Delaney’s family history simultaneously reminded readers that the Civil War was the culmination of a much longer struggle in which the enslaved were the primary actors in their own emancipation.⁵⁹⁷

For Amanda Smith, the narrative of her family’s initial “escape” from slavery in the early 1840s occupies a relatively small space in the autobiography as a whole. Smith was a small child when her father purchased their freedom and, like Delaney, evidently relied on the testimony of her parents in order to reconstruct the details of that period in their lives. Smith’s parents, Samuel and Mariam, lived on adjoining farms and were owned by different whites; perhaps at least partly due to her own very limited experience and memory of slavery, Smith tells the reader that her parents “had each a good master and mistress.”⁵⁹⁸ Nonetheless, her description of her father’s efforts to purchase his family’s freedom revealed the white families’ resistance to parting with their human property. It was only after repeated attempts that he convinced his wife’s owners to let him pay for the freedom of his wife and five children.⁵⁹⁹ Smith describes her father’s hard work and determination as he put in long hours to earn the necessary money. She writes, “He had an important and definite object before him, and was willing to sacrifice sleep and rest in order to accomplish it. It was not his own liberty alone, but the freedom of his

⁵⁹⁶ Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, v.

⁵⁹⁷ The narratives of Sylvia Dubois, Amanda Smith, and Fanny Jackson Coppin also spoke to African Americans’ longer struggle by drawing attention to the ways that African Americans pursued freedom in the antebellum era.

⁵⁹⁸ Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 17.

⁵⁹⁹ Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 20-23.

wife and five children. For this he toiled day and night.”⁶⁰⁰ Like Delaney and other women writers, Smith’s narrative represented emancipation as a family affair and emphasized the strength of those bonds.⁶⁰¹

Among postbellum women writers, Smith’s narrative is unique for what it reveals about African Americans’ participation in the Underground Railroad. While Smith was too young to remember much about slavery, she distinctly remembered her mother and father’s bravery in assisting fugitive slaves once they were living as free people in Pennsylvania. The dramatic “escape stories” that usually appeared in antebellum slave narratives are here supplanted by the story of her family’s ongoing resistance to slavery as they helped dozens of individuals gain freedom over the years. It is significant that this, too, is represented as a family affair and one in which her mother plays a critical role. In a fascinating turn, Smith represents the female (former) slave not as helpless victim *or* hunted fugitive, but as protector of her family and of the fugitives that arrive at their door.

Writing in the 1890s, Smith’s discussion of the Underground Railroad would have reminded northern whites of a longer struggle against slavery and sectional tension over the Fugitive Slave Law, which extended the Slaveocracy’s power into free territory. At the same time, she challenged the mythology surrounding the idea of a white-led Underground Railroad by concentrating entirely on her family’s

⁶⁰⁰ Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 18.

⁶⁰¹ A number of the men and women whose narratives are examined in this chapter also gained freedom through self-purchase. For example, Elizabeth Keckley purchased her freedom and her son’s; Fanny Jackson Coppin’s grandfather purchased the freedom of some of his children and one of them, Coppin’s aunt, saved the money to buy Coppin’s freedom; Robert Anderson bought his wife’s freedom and then his own.

significant efforts to assist runaways.⁶⁰² Pointing to the way that white government officials were bound to obey the Fugitive Slave Law regardless of their beliefs, she shows white antislavery men as sympathetic, but represents her father and mother as the ones who take decisive action to assist fugitives and guard their home from the slavecatchers who harass and threaten them.⁶⁰³

Smith describes several instances in which the family harbored a fugitive and faced the scrutiny of slave catchers. On one occasion, six or seven white men forced their way into the house because they were certain a fugitive was there. Her mother tried to intervene as one of the men beat her husband and was nearly stabbed during the confrontation. According to Smith, this incident put a new spirit in her mother.

She cried bitterly, but O, when it was all over how she had gathered courage and strength." When men came knocking at midnight a few months later, her mother was on the ready for a fight. "My father went down and opened the

⁶⁰² Foner's recent study finds that the support of black communities – free and enslaved, in the North and the South – was critical to the success of most escape attempts. His research shows that in the North, African Americans were at the forefront of efforts to assist fugitive slaves and kidnapped free blacks. The formal vigilance committees which started to be established in the 1830s sometimes had an interracial leadership, but were dominated by African American members and activism. Despite this reality, many white abolitionists who published memoirs after the Civil War (and, later, the historians who relied on those memoirs) contributed to the memory and image of the Underground Railroad as a white-led network. As Foner summarizes, "Although these memoirs included much information about slaves' determination to be free, they tended to make white abolitionists the central actors of the story." Julie Roy Jeffrey has also written about the way that white abolitionists' post-war memoirs created a heroic narrative for the author at the expense of acknowledging fugitives' own agency or African Americans' critical role in assisting runaways. In this context, Amanda Smith's 1893 account of her family's role in assisting fugitives is an important addition to late nineteenth-century representations of the Underground Railroad. See Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 11, 18-19; Jeffrey, *Abolitionists Remember*.

⁶⁰³ She describes the area where they live as having some antislavery sympathizers, but also men who made a business of hunting fugitives. Smith writes that their landlord, John Lowe, was aware of her parents' Underground Railroad activities and "would allow my father to do what he could in secreting the poor slaves that would get away and come to him for protection. At one time he was Magistrate, and of course did not hunt down poor slaves, and would support the law whenever things were brought before him in a proper way, but my father and mother were level headed and had good broad common sense, so they never brought him into any trouble." Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 31.

door. Mother listened and heard them say ‘runaway nigger.’ She sprang up, and as she ran downstairs she snatched down father’s cane, which had a small dirk in it; she went and threw open the door, pushed father aside, but he got hold of her, but O, when she got through with those men! They fell back and tried to apologize, but she would hear nothing. [line break] ‘I can’t go to my bed and sleep at night without being hounded by you devils,’ she said.

The next morning, her mother went into town and “told every body [*sic*] she met” about the men, giving their names and publicly shaming them for the threat their midnight visit represented to her family and the man-hunting mission they were on in the first place.⁶⁰⁴

Smith recalled that when slave catchers came to the house a few years later, they were still leery of an encounter with her mother. When her father told the men to come into the house and see for themselves whether or not he was harboring anyone, Smith writes, “The men hesitated and said: ‘It is no use for us to go in, if you will just tell us if you have him or know anything about him.’” When her father again insisted that they come see for themselves, the men said, “ ‘We have heard your wife is the devil,’ and then, speaking very nicely, ‘You know, Sam, we don’t want any trouble with her, you can tell us just as well.’” Smith represents her mother as a formidable figure who has not only caused the slave catchers to want to avoid her personally, but has succeeded in making them think twice about invading the private space of their home. In this instance, her mother successfully hid the fugitive they were harboring so that he was not detected when the whites finally entered the house. Smith represents her mother as being the decisive actor – her

⁶⁰⁴ Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 33-34.

father was outside working in the field when the men approached him and he had no idea where or how his wife might have hidden the man. Smith writes, “He didn’t know a bit what mother had done, but he knew she had a head on her, and he could trust her in an emergency.” After the men leave the house without discovering the fugitive, her mother helped the terrified man out of his hiding place. Smith recalled, “He trembled from head to foot, and cried like a child. Poor fellow, he thought he was gone, and but for my noble mother he would have been.”⁶⁰⁵ Amanda Smith represents her mother’s activities with the “Underground Railroad” in heroic terms.

Mattie Jackson’s narrative unfolds primarily during the chaos of the Civil War – and, yet, the tumult her family experienced during those years seems like a continuation of the kind of struggles, change, and uncertainty they endured throughout their lives in slavery. During the war, as before, the family repeatedly tried to escape, changed hands between multiple owners, and resisted sale and separation. During the war years, the Union Army, stationed in St. Louis, was a sympathetic presence that the Jacksons sometimes appealed to for assistance – but Jackson most often represents the Union as lacking the power to ensure permanent protection or freedom for slaves in the city. Writing about her experience during the Civil War, she does not portray freedom as a consequence of *the war*, but of slaves’ own actions – and as part of a much longer struggle that they have been waging for decades.

Like Delaney, Jackson places family and her mother, Ellen Turner, at the center of her experience of slavery and her attempts to resist and escape it. Turner

⁶⁰⁵ Smith, *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith*, 36.

emerges as a heroic figure who repeatedly fights for the integrity of her family and the freedom of individual members. Over the course of the narrative, Jackson recounts how slavery separated Turner from two husbands and one fiancé, the first two of whom ran away rather than be sold. Jackson recalls both the pain of these losses and her parents' determination to exercise what control they could over the situation. When Jackson's father is sold, Turner helps him make his escape rather than risk permanent separation if he is sold again, out of state. Writing from her mother's perspective, Jackson recalled,

Though the parting was painful, it afforded her solace in the contemplation of her husband becoming a free man, and cherishing a hope that her little family, through the aid of some angel of mercy, might be enabled to make their escape also, and meet to part no more on this earth.

Her father used a planned overnight visit to his family as an opportunity to flee without detection and Turner refused to give his master any information about his plans or whereabouts. Although they are unable to make contact, Turner gets word that her husband is living in Chicago and eventually tries to join him, running with her two daughters in tow. They reached Illinois, but were quickly found by slave catchers, returned to St. Louis, and sold at auction.⁶⁰⁶

Jackson's family continued to struggle for independence in Civil War-St. Louis. She describes herself and her mother as very aware of war-time developments and hopeful that the Southern Rebellion might eventually end in emancipation; Turner keeps a picture of Lincoln in her cabin and argues politics with her mistress, much to the white family's chagrin. Jackson and Turner are

⁶⁰⁶ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 5-7.

aware of the Union Army's presence in the city and they strategically appeal to the Union when they need immediate assistance or intervention. At the same time, however – writing only one year after Southern defeat resulted in total emancipation – Jackson does not represent the Union Army as a force of “white saviors;” rather, she points to the limits of individual Union men’s power under a wartime policy that was not yet committed to ending slavery in all territories. Jackson seeks protection at the Union encampment after she is badly beaten by her master; earlier, she tried to gain sanctuary at the Arsenal, but was denied entrance; the second time, she is given a place to stay in exchange for work, but the General returns her to her master three weeks later when he comes to inquire after her and promises to not mistreat her. The family is later sold as a punishment for their recalcitrance, and their new master has plans to make a profit by illegally selling them out of state. Although the Union soldiers stepped in to prevent the act of smuggling when Jackson’s mother raised an alarm, Jackson notes that their powers were limited – “The watchmen came to her assistance immediately, and there was quite a number of Union policemen guarding the city at that time, who rendered her due justice *as far as possible* [author emphasis]. This was before the emancipation proclamation.” She continued, “The Union soldiers had possession of the city, but their power was limited to the suppression of the selling of slaves to go out of the city. Considerable smuggling was done, however, by pretending Unionism, which was the case with our family.” The Union is able to prevent their smuggling this time, but after swearing his allegiance and promising to keep them in the city, their

new owner Captain Tirrell succeeds in his second attempt to get them out of state; once in Kentucky, Jackson, her sister, and her mother and brother are sold apart.

Jacksons shows the Union as a sympathetic presence, sometimes able to provide temporary sanctuary, but ultimately powerless to interfere with a slave owner's still-legal rights over his human property. As long as the Union remained willing to compromise with / or accommodate the slave owners in their midst in Border States or Union-occupied territory, the fundamental abuses of slavery could continue mostly unfettered. Remembering the prevalence of slave speculation in war-time St. Louis, Jackson wrote, "Kentucky paid as much, or more than ever, for slaves. As they pretended to take no part in the rebellion they supposed they would be allowed to keep them without interference." Jackson testified to the fact that slave owners were more than willing to falsely represent their intentions and allegiances; and that Union men often had to simply take them at their word.⁶⁰⁷

While Jackson represents the Union as sympathetic but sometimes ineffectual, her mother emerges as the decisive actor in many of the family's wartime confrontations – in fact, the family's various owners exert far more energy in trying to control Turner than they do in trying to trick the Union Army – it is Turner, not the Army, that they perceive as the primary threat and obstacle to their intentions. When Jackson first ran away from Mr. Lewis after a beating, he placed her mother in the trader's yard to prevent her from trying to find Jackson and run

⁶⁰⁷ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 14-15. For more about the Union Army's relationship to slavery in Civil War St. Louis, as well as the ways that enslaved women sought to use the army as an ally in their claims for freedom and citizenship, see Sharon Romeo, *Gender and the Jubilee: Black Freedom and the Reconstruction of Citizenship in Civil War Missouri* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).

away with the entire family. Later, Turner does take the children and hide in the city, but Lewis finds them and places them in the trader's yard once more after their confidence is betrayed. After Mr. Lewis placed Jackson and her family in the trader's yard a final time, Captain Tirrell purchases Jackson's mother, sister, and brother, and tries to transport them out of the city in a covered wagon. Jackson writes that her mother refused to go without her and threatened to "raise an alarm." She was forced onto the wagon, where a man was stationed to prevent her escape, but she "sprang to her feet and gave this man a desperate blow, and leaping to the ground she made the alarm." The wagon departed with her children still inside, but Turner is successful in getting the police's attention and getting her children back.⁶⁰⁸ When Tirrell moves to transport the family a second time several months later, Jackson recalled that they were forced into a carriage and "For fear of my mother alarming the citizens they threw her to the ground and choked her until she was nearly strangled, then pushed her into the coach." When they are transferred to a train, the slave trader puts Turner's son on a different car so that she will not be tempted to make an escape and thus be separated from him.⁶⁰⁹ In recreating these scenes for the reader, Jackson portrays her mother as a force to be reckoned with, engaged in a constant struggle for the integrity of her family.

Jackson and the other members of her family do ultimately gain their freedom, but not as a group. They are separated when they reach Kentucky and find separate paths to freedom, too; though all but Jackson's sister are reunited in the

⁶⁰⁸ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 14-15.

⁶⁰⁹ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 18-20.

aftermath. Jackson describes her own escape to Indianapolis, with the assistance of African Americans who helped “slaves to escape by the underground railroad.”⁶¹⁰ She gives almost no information about the means by which her sister, mother, and brother escaped – but it is important to note that despite the fact that the Civil War was over when they gained their freedom, Jackson still uses the language of “escape” for her mother and siblings. In doing so, she continued to emphasize their individual agency rather than portray their freedom as a result of the war or the actions of Lincoln or the Union Army. She eulogizes Lincoln, whose remains she views in Indianapolis, and describes his death as being “like an electric shock to my soul.” She does not, however, credit him with her family’s freedom.⁶¹¹

In choosing to devote far less attention to the details of the family’s final escapes, Jackson places a greater narrative importance on the ways that her mother repeatedly fought for the integrity and freedom of the family over the years. Although they do not escape together, Jackson’s full joy and experience in freedom is only complete when her mother escapes and joins her. She writes,

My mother had been a slave for more than forty-three years, and liberty was very sweet to her. ... I was overjoyed with my personal freedom, but the joy at my mother’s escape was greater than anything I had ever known. It was a joy that reaches beyond the tide and chorus in the harbor of eternal rest. While in oppression, this eternal life-preserver had continually wafted her toward the land of freedom, which she was confident of gaining, whatever might betide. Our joy that we were permitted to mingle together our earthly bliss in glorious strains of freedom was indiscribable [*sic*].⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 21-22.

⁶¹¹ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 24-25.

⁶¹² Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 26.

Once they are reunited, they return to St. Louis, in the full realization of their changed status: “We were then free, and instead of being hurried along, bare headed and half naked, through cars and boats, by a brutal master with a bill of sale in his pocket, we were on our own, comfortably clothed, and having the true emblems of freedom.” Jackson only takes this freedom journey when she is reunited with the mother who fought so desperately to protect her family on their previous journey to Kentucky. Mattie Jackson represents her freedom struggle as a family affair and uses the space of her narrative to memorialize her mother’s heroism.⁶¹³

Like Lucy Delaney and Mattie Jackson, Kate Drumgoold’s “escape story” underlines her mother’s heroism and decisive role in freeing the family. A young girl at the time of the Civil War, Drumgoold’s memory of that period is dominated by her mother – both the pain of family separation when her mother is sold away, and the strength she showed when she later returned to reclaim her children.⁶¹⁴

Drumgoold’s mother, whose name she does not give, is sold without warning at the beginning of the Civil War, in order to raise the money to pay for a substitute in the Confederate Army; she is forced to leave behind all of her children, including a six-week-old baby.⁶¹⁵ In the aftermath, Drumgoold and her siblings were also

⁶¹³ Jackson, *Story of Mattie J. Jackson*, 26.

⁶¹⁴ Despite describing a loving relationship with her white mistress (who died before the rest of the white family began breaking Drumgoold’s family apart), Drumgoold does not represent that childhood attachment as supplanting the deep bond she felt with her mother. In remembering her mother’s sale, she writes, “That is one of the saddest times of life for children when they do not know if they shall ever see her face on this green earth any more [*sic*]; and if to-day we should hear the cries of those little lambs it surely would break the heart of a stone, for remember that we have the same feelings for our mothers as any race of people and our hearts will melt as easily as the richest ones on this earth.” Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl’s Story*, 29-32.

⁶¹⁵ It is unclear exactly how many children Drumgoold’s mother had. Kate mentions twice that when the family is reunited after the war, her mother travels to New York with “her ten little girls,” including the baby that she was separated from at six weeks old. They also reconnect with Kate’s

separated, as some of the children were hired out, distributed to different members of the white family, or sent to labor for the Confederate Army, in the case of Drumgoold's only brother.⁶¹⁶ Her mother returns at the close of the war to find her husband remarried and all of her children scattered in different places.⁶¹⁷

Drumgoold describes her mother as steadfast in her resolve to get her children back, despite her former owners' repeated attempts to keep her from them. Ultimately, she had to enlist the help of Union soldiers to force the children's release, but

Drumgoold emphasizes her mother's own actions over the course of the conflict.⁶¹⁸

only brother. That would suggest a total of eleven children. However, in another place, Drumgoold says that her brother was the oldest of eighteen children. Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 6, 9-10, 15.⁶¹⁶ Drumgoold comments that after their initial separation, she did not see her mother again "until after the war of 1865." The war is over when her mother returns, but the children's exact status is unclear. Though they are legally entitled to their freedom, it seems that they occupied the same positions they did as slaves; it is unclear whether they felt they had the freedom to leave those positions or whether they were receiving compensation of any kind. The one exception is Drumgoold's brother – the only son – who was sent to work for the Confederate Army and eventually succeeded in escaping to Union lines. He is living as a free person at the end of the war and is reunited with the rest of the family when they learn of his whereabouts. Drumgoold writes that her brother, James, "was sent away to the war to keep his master at home." Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 9-10, 31-35.

⁶¹⁷ Drumgoold never mentions her father or her mother's husband prior to noting that he had another wife when her mother returned. It is unclear whether the husband was, in fact, Drumgoold's birth father; but it seems likely that they were living in an abroad marriage and that is why he was not a significant presence in Drumgoold's life. Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 9.

⁶¹⁸ Annie Burton tells a similar story regarding how she gained her freedom as a child at the end of the Civil War. Her mother ran away after being whipped, but returned at the close of the war to reunite her family. Burton and her siblings remained with the same white family, but their former owners refused to give them up. Burton's mother sneaks her children off the property at night. When they reach their new home, the former master's two sons arrive on horseback and demand the return of the children. Burton recalled, "My mother refused to give us up. Upon offering to go with them to the Yankee headquarters to find out if it were really true that all negroes had been made free, the young men left, and troubled us no more." While Drumgoold's mother had to involve Union men directly, Burton's mother is able to strategically use them as a threat to enforce her own authority to reclaim her children. Burton tells the story of this confrontation twice in her narrative, suggesting how central it was to her memory of her mother. In the second telling, Burton gives voice to her mother telling someone about the incident immediately afterwards. Burton writes, "My mother [said], '... I have been away from my little brood for four years. With a hard struggle, I have got them away from the Farrin plantation, for they did not want to let them go. But I got them. I was determined to have them. ...'" For Burton's descriptions of their escape and the subsequent confrontation, see Annie L. Burton, *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*, 8-12 and 39-43.

Drumgoold describes a loving relationship between herself and her white mistress, but the actions of the rest of the family after this woman's death gave lie to any notion of paternalism. The white family repeatedly used and broke apart the enslaved family in order to meet their needs; and after they no longer had legal authority over them, they took extreme measures to try to continue to profit from their labor and prevent the reunion of the African American family they had disrupted. When Drumgoold's mother returns to her former owners and finds several of her children missing, the whites refuse to tell her where the other children are and falsely tell her that some of them are dead. Emphasizing her mother's determination, Drumgoold wrote,

And when she had gone for them [the children] and was told that some of her own were dead, she said that she would go dig up their bones; but they were not dead, as was said, and she sent the soldiers after them and sometimes they were told the same as mother was, and some of the little ones had to be sent for two or three times before they were brought.⁶¹⁹

Once their mother has returned, Drumgoold and a few of her sisters leave the plantation in order to join her, despite the white family's protests and threats. Drumgoold's oldest sister knew the location of several of the other children and was able to help her mother and the soldiers find them. They asked after her sister Lavinia repeatedly and when the soldiers finally went to the house and demanded her release, the whites "took off all of her clothing and put them into water to keep them from taking her."⁶²⁰ Drumgoold's mother had to wrap Lavinia in blankets, but she still took sick on the journey to their new home. Drumgoold's description of

⁶¹⁹ Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 8.

⁶²⁰ Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 8-9.

these confrontations reminded contemporary readers of white southerners' commitment to maintaining racial servitude and white supremacy in the "sunny South."⁶²¹

Like Mattie Jackson, Drumgoold represents the Union soldiers as a sympathetic presence, but not as saviors or liberators of her family. That designation is for her mother, who she describes as returning to the plantation having "made up her mind that she would take her children to a part of this land where she thought they would never be in bondage any more on this earth."⁶²² Before moving on to talk about her life and experience in freedom, Drumgoold pauses to reflect on the many people, now gone from this earth, that she will always hold dear in her memory – many of them instrumental in fighting for African American rights and the end of slavery. She includes both historic figures and personal friends in this list, but her praise for the work of Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, Ulysses S. Grant, Charles Sumner, and Frederick Douglass reads like a

⁶²¹ Drumgoold's only brother, James, is not part of this main story about her mother reclaiming the rest of the children. James was not in the area, having previously been sent to the frontlines as a laborer for the Confederate Army. However, James does successfully escape to Union lines on his own, (later to be reunited with the rest of the family) and Drumgoold connects his pursuit of freedom to the same spirit in her mother. Drumgoold writes, "He was sent away to the war to keep his master at home, and we did not hear from him for a long time, but we made up our minds that if he did not get killed he would go over to the Northern side as soon as he should get the chance, though we did not see him to tell him to do so, for all of my mother's children were like herself in the love of freedom. My mother was one that the master could not do anything to make her feel like a slave and she would battle with them to the last that she would not recognize them as her lord and master and she was right." Drumgoold goes on to write, "The gentleman that my dear brother belonged to was a Methodist and a minister. He did not want to go to the war and so he sent my poor brother to defend what belonged to him, and he did not get the good of it after all, for my brother was determined that he would gain his freedom if he could and he tried and did not get tired of trying." James is not directly freed by his mother's hands, but Drumgoold intimates that his act of self-emancipation was a product of his mother's influence. Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 32-34.

⁶²² Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 6.

personal monument to those men – her own rendition of Mt. Rushmore. And carved between the visages of General Grant and Charles Sumner is the memory of her mother –

another dear one that God will help me to remember with all of the love and gratitude, ... as she was the one that brought me on to this lovely city, and that is my mother, who has gone to that land of song where there is no more sickness or sorrow and where God will dry every tear.⁶²³

Drumgoold honors her mother as a heroic figure, responsible for freeing herself and her siblings and bringing them to a city where “they would never be in bondage any more on this earth.”

Stories of self-emancipation are not as important a theme in most of the thirteen male-authored narratives read for this study. As was true for the women writers, approximately half of the male authors in this sample gained freedom in the antebellum era and half in the context of the Civil War. One of the most striking differences between these samples is that far fewer of the male writers gained freedom through acts of self-emancipation; only 4 out of the 13 specifically address how they freed themselves. In the antebellum period, William Parker, Francis Frederick, and William Walker ran to freedom, and Robert Anderson worked to purchase his freedom and that of his wife.⁶²⁴ Historically, we know that William Wells Brown emancipated himself by running away in the 1830s, but *My Southern Home* is not centered on his own experience of slavery and says nothing about his

⁶²³ Drumgoold, *A Slave Girl's Story*, 35-38.

⁶²⁴ For each of these authors' accounts of gaining freedom, see: Parker, *The Freedman's Story*, 157-160; Frederick, *Autobiography of Rev. Francis Frederick*, 32-36; Walker, *Buried Alive*, 54-55; Anderson, *The Life of Rev. Robert Anderson*, 16, 41-42.

life or escape.⁶²⁵ Lewis Charlton also gains freedom in the antebellum era, but he offers no information about that process in his narrative. He simply states, “When I became twenty-eight years of age I obtained my freedom and went to live with a man by the name of Mr. George Burroughs, who was a stone cutter by trade.”⁶²⁶ In states where gradual emancipation was enacted, 28 was sometimes the age set for apprenticed African American men to gain their full freedom. However, Charlton was enslaved in Maryland, where there was no such law; he writes about his repeated sale as a slave prior to this, and he never says anything about an apprenticeship. For whatever reason, he chose to not write about how he gained his freedom.

Seven of the male writers gained freedom during the Civil War. Six of those – Harry Smith, Thomas Johnson, Henry Jeter, Jared Maurice Arter, Thomas Burton, and Booker T. Washington – describe becoming free with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation and/or upon Southern defeat. Unlike Mattie Jackson, Susie King Taylor, and Emma J. Smith Ray, they did not pursue war-time freedom by running away; they remained under the authority of their owners until emancipation became a legal reality.⁶²⁷ William Blair, who seems also to have

⁶²⁵ Brown tells the story of his escape from slavery in his first narrative, published in 1847. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: The Anti-slavery office, 1847).

⁶²⁶ Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton*, 6.

⁶²⁷ For each author’s account of gaining freedom at the end of the Civil War, see: Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 122-124; Johnson, *Africa for Christ*, 25-26; Jeter, *Pastor Henry N. Jeter’s Twenty-Five Years Experience with the Shiloh Baptist Church*, 15; Arter, *Echoes from a Pioneer Life*, 12; Burton, *What Experience Has Taught Me*, 25-26; and Washington, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Life and Work*, 19-20.

gained freedom during the war years, offers no explanation of how or when he became free.⁶²⁸

Given the limited nature of this sample, one cannot and should not draw any conclusions about men and women's relative likelihood of becoming free through acts of self-emancipation. However, it is striking that the process of gaining freedom and the moment of emancipation are much less significant in the way that these particular male authors chose to tell their stories. Three say nothing; six who gained freedom at the end of the war devote only a few sentences to that moment.⁶²⁹ The four men who engage with their acts of self-emancipation devote between a few paragraphs and a few pages to that part of their lives.

For our purposes, this data is most useful for bringing the patterns in women's narratives into relief. Women represented slavery and freedom as family affairs, and shed light on the ways that families sometimes negotiated freedom together, in a protracted struggle. They emphasized the strength of mother-daughter (parent-child) relationships and portrayed women and mothers as heroic

⁶²⁸ Blair seems to simply skip over the explanation for how he gained his freedom, as he moves from briefly acknowledging that he was born a slave, to talking about his family's movement during and immediately after the war years. See Blair, *Book for the People*, 3-4

⁶²⁹ As already noted, William Wells Brown, Lewis Charlton, and William Blair offer no explanation for how they gained freedom. Robert Anderson, who buys his freedom and that of his wife, devotes only two paragraphs to describing the sums of money he paid to his master and mistress over a period of several years. The six men who gained freedom at the end of the Civil War devote a few sentences to that moment. In some cases, this minimal attention may be partly related to the nature of the individual text – these books are not a unified genre and some of them are not primarily autobiographical in nature. (For example, Jeter's book, *Pastor Henry N. Jeter's Twenty-Five Years Experience with the Shiloh Baptist Church and Her History*, is a history of the church from its founding in 1864 to the end of the nineteenth century. It contains autobiographical information in that Jeter talks about his own involvement with the church, in the third-person, as part of that history, and he includes short biographical notes for most of the church leaders he mentions, including himself. See Jeter, 19-24.) Nonetheless, it is a pattern worth thinking more about.

actors in their own emancipation. Importantly, they showed that this was true even in the context of the Civil War, wherein Lincoln, the Union Army, and African American soldiers are often given credit for freeing the millions from bondage. This is not the story told by this sample of male narratives. Most of the men do not place narrative importance on gaining freedom at all. The fact that many women *did* suggests that resistance to slavery and their individual efforts to claim freedom for themselves and their families were deeply important to their identities and to the way that they remembered their relationship to slavery. The three male narratives in which the men flee slavery in the antebellum tell the story of men escaping, alone or in company with other men.⁶³⁰ Only one of the eleven women's narratives that recount acts of self-emancipation by the writers or their parents involves the decisive action being taken by a man (Amanda Smith's father buys the freedom of his wife and children); and even in this case, Smith later emphasizes her mother's role in helping male fugitives successfully escape and avoid recapture. Six of the men who gained freedom at the end of the Civil War fit the picture of slaves who were "set free" by others. All but one of the women who gained freedom during the war wrote about how she and/or her family seized it for themselves.⁶³¹ The contrast provided by looking at these twenty six narratives together helps us understand how important the story was that these women were telling – how

⁶³⁰ William Parker escapes with his brother; Francis Frederick escapes alone, with the assistance of whites on the Underground Railroad; William Walker escapes with another male slave.

⁶³¹ This one exception is Millie-Christine, who I note earlier gave very little attention to the Civil War or emancipation, remained with the white family that previously owned them after becoming legally free, and made no attempt to establish an independent household.

different freedom and emancipation looked when told through their eyes, and when necessarily became central actors.

“Let us not forget that terrible war:” Susie King Taylor and Civil War Memory

For most of the women writers who actually gained their freedom during the Civil War, their memories of the sectional conflict are largely told through stories of self-emancipation like those in the previous section. They upheld an emancipationist vision of the war which emphasized the myriad ways that African Americans pursued freedom for themselves and their families, waging their own war against a “Rebel South” that was determined to maintain control over the enslaved. But this was not the “emancipationist” memory which we are most familiar with. By and large, these were not narratives that placed Lincoln, the Union Army, or black soldiers above all else. Considering the degree to which African American communities’ collective memories and commemorations of the Civil War focused on the bravery, service, and sacrifice of black soldiers, it is interesting to note that most of the female authors do not mention African American soldiers at all. In the body of their narratives, Mattie Jackson, Kate Drumgoold, Annie Burton, and Emma J. Smith Ray make no mention of African American troops. The same is true for Millie-Christine, Bethany Veney, Sylvia Dubois, and Lucy Delaney, who gained freedom in the antebellum.⁶³² Amanda Smith only briefly mentions that

⁶³² I include Mattie Jackson’s and Fanny Jackson Coppin’s narratives among those that make no mention of African American troops in the body of the narrative. I will note, however, that Mattie Jackson’s narrative includes a poem (most likely authored by her stepmother and editor/anamnesis) with one line that references black troops. Part II of Fanny Jackson Coppin’s book was written and

several family members, including her first husband and multiple brothers, served as soldiers in the Union Army. Despite her residence in Washington D.C. and intimate association with the White House, Elizabeth Keckley only mentions black soldiers in passing, recalling that DC residents were happy when they learned that the Confederate capitol was surrendered to “colored troops.” In fact, only two of the narratives make more than passing mention of black troops.

Susie King Taylor’s narrative is unique among the post-bellum narratives for her focus on the Union army and African American troops. But, like the other women writers who gained freedom 1861-1865, Taylor remembers the war in terms of her personal experience; she writes about the army from the perspective of a woman who travelled with them as a regimental laundress and nurse until they were mustered out in 1866. Her narrative’s title, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers*, puts it in the context of the war-time “reminiscences” which many white veterans were writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and is particularly remarkable, in that way, as a war-time recollection by a woman and an African American. In his introduction to the book, Thomas Wentworth Higginson places Taylor’s narrative in this context of other war reminiscences, comparing it to his own book, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, and commenting on the uniqueness of having the military life of black troops described by a black woman “whose place was in the ranks” and who

completed by William C. Bolivar following her death. Bolivar includes brief biographical sketches of many of Coppin’s colleagues and students; some of these sketches mention individual men’s participation in the war as part of African American regiments. I must also acknowledge that most of the women who gain freedom in the antebellum pay limited to no attention to the Civil War in the first place, despite living through it and publishing years after it. That is true for Millie-Christine, Sylvia Dubois, Fanny Jackson Coppin, and Lucy Delaney.

traveled and worked alongside them.⁶³³ Taylor wrote and published her narrative in 1902, at the urging of friends and “members of the Grand Army of the Republic and Women’s Relief Corps.”⁶³⁴

Of all the women writers, Taylor is the one writing most directly toward creating a larger memory of the Civil War itself. In her preface, Taylor writes that she presents her recollections to the reader,

hoping they may prove of some interest, and show how much good we can do to each other, and what sacrifices we can make for our liberty and rights, and that there were ‘loyal women,’ as well as men, in those days, who did not fear shell or shot, who cared for the sick and dying; women who camped and fared as the boys did, and who are still caring for the comrades in their declining years.⁶³⁵

These were important things to remind the public of at the beginning of the twentieth century and, as Taylor herself noted, in the wake of a new wave of racial violence in the South. Taylor’s memoir makes three particularly important contributions to narratives regarding the Civil War. First, she adds African American women to the narrative of bravery, service, and sacrifice that usually focused on male veterans. Like the other postbellum women authors who wrote about the Civil War in terms of their and their families’ own acts of self-emancipation, Taylor places women at the center of a story that was typically dominated by men. Second, she highlights the shared experience of white and African American soldiers in the Union Army, as they fought a common enemy. In an era of national reconciliation, when Memorial Day speeches honored the bravery

⁶³³ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, xi-xiii.

⁶³⁴ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, x.

⁶³⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, x.

and sacrifice of white soldiers North and South, Taylor's depiction of the opposing armies demonstrated that black and white soldiers in the Union army were the only true "brothers in arms." Third, Taylor reminded northern readers of what those "brothers" fought for and of the necessity of defending African Americans' hard-won freedom and rights.

Taylor was fourteen years old in 1862, when she escaped to Union lines with her uncle and other family members. She began teaching children and adults in the contraband settlement on St. Simon's Island, after white officers took note of her ability to read and write.⁶³⁶ In that same year, she married Sergeant Edward King, of the South Carolina Volunteers, and travelled with him as the company's laundress; but she wore many hats during her years with the 33d U.S. Colored Infantry. Taylor writes, "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." Taylor did laundry, cooked, and cleaned and loaded guns; but she identified most strongly with her role as a nurse and caretaker for wounded soldiers. "My services were given at all times for the comfort of these men."⁶³⁷

Taylor implicitly places her own service and sacrifice on behalf of the Union Army in the context of the service of African American soldiers and other (primarily white) women who came south during the war as nurses, teachers, and aid workers. In his opening letter of support, Col. Trowbridge, who led the 33d Regiment which

⁶³⁶ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 8-11.

⁶³⁷ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 34-35.

Taylor travelled with, spoke of her “unselfish devotion and service through more than three long years of war” and regretted that a technicality prevented her from receiving a pension as an Army Nurse. “For among all the number of heroic women whom the government is now rewarding,” he wrote, “I know of no one more deserving than yourself.” Although she often performed the work of a nurse, Taylor was not officially registered as a nurse with the army and was thus excluded from receiving a pension on that basis.⁶³⁸ But she reminds the reader that that was her real role, describing the care she provided to different soldiers, and her visits to the hospital in Beaufort. There, she met Clara Barton, who was doing the same kind of work with the “sick and wounded soldiers there.” In describing Barton’s cordiality towards her and her respect for Barton’s “devotion and care of those men,” Taylor implicitly draws a connection between their roles.⁶³⁹ She further emphasizes her devotion when she writes about her post-war work in the Grand Army of the Republic and assures the reader that she remained “loyal and true” and deeply interested “in the boys in blue” even in the war’s aftermath.⁶⁴⁰ Moving beyond her personal experience and contributions, Taylor also reminded readers that many African American women served the Union Army in some way and should be acknowledged. Taylor writes,

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 by hiding them and helping them to escape. Many were punished for

⁶³⁸ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, xiii. Historian Jane E. Schultz writes about the obstacles that African American and working-class women faced in receiving post-war pensions as nurses. See Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 183-210.

⁶³⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 30.

⁶⁴⁰ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 59.

taking food to the prison stockades for the prisoners. ... Others assisted in various ways the Union army. These things should be kept 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.⁶⁴¹

Taylor's description of her duties and life in camp spoke to the hard conditions of war and the hidden strengths which women also had to muster in order to do their duty. Taylor wrote,

It seems strange how our aversion to seeing suffering is overcome by war,-- how we are able to see the most sickening sights, such as men with their limbs blown off and mangled by the deadly shells, without a shudder; and instead of running away, how we hurry to assist in alleviating their pain, bind up their wounds, and press the cool water to their parched lips, with feelings of sympathy and pity.⁶⁴²

Referencing the horrors of this modern war and the suffering which she and other women witnessed and tried to alleviate would have been meaningful to both black and white veterans. Taylor also equated her own service and sacrifice with that of African American soldiers who served without pay for eighteen months, repeatedly mentioning that *she* served without pay and gladly made that sacrifice, knowing that her services were needed. She writes, "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."⁶⁴³ At first glance, Taylor's focus on the war and her experience while traveling with an African American regiment would seem to fit some of our expectations regarding black

⁶⁴¹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 67-68.

⁶⁴² Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 31-32.

⁶⁴³ For quote, see Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 22. She also writes about black soldiers' service and sacrifice without pay, as they waited for full pay, including the negative impact it had on soldiers' families. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 15-26, 28, 51.

memory. But she fundamentally alters that narrative by placing her own experience and service with the Union Army – and women’s service more broadly – at the center of the story she tells.

In her retelling of the war, Taylor also draws attention to the shared experience of white and African American Union soldiers in fighting a common enemy. Much as Frederick Douglass did in his 1878 Memorial Address, Taylor reminds readers that there was a right side and a wrong side to the war, and that the white South was the enemy.⁶⁴⁴ She refers to the Southerners as “Rebels” and “Confederates” throughout the book and suggests that they were both cowardly and cruel. She remembers one incident in which several white soldiers of the Confederacy blackened their faces in order to ease their approach toward Union lines and then fired on and killed several Union soldiers.⁶⁴⁵ Taylor also recalls Rebel bushwhackers who hid in waiting at Union camps and ambushed Union soldiers in the dead of night, sometimes slitting their throats as they slept. She recalls also how the Rebels set fire to the city of Charleston as they fled, “leaving women and children behind to suffer and perish in the flames.” The black soldiers in Taylor’s regiment fought the fires and worked to save people’s property, but they were still treated with disdain by Charlestonian whites because of their race. “... [A]lthough these

⁶⁴⁴ Douglass wrote, “There was a right side and a wrong side in the late war which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget, and while today we should have malice toward none, and charity toward all, it is no part of our duty to confound right with wrong, or loyalty with treason. ...” Frederick Douglass, “Speech in Madison Square in Honor of Decoration Day,” May 30, 1878, Frederick Douglass Papers, American Memory Project, Library of Congress, printed in *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 3rd edition, ed. Michael Perman and Amy Murrell Taylor (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2011), 469-472.

⁶⁴⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 22-23.

brave men risked life and limb to assist them in their distress, men and even women would sneer and molest them whenever they met them.”⁶⁴⁶

Taylor is most effective at rendering the South as enemy when she describes their treatment of white and black prisoners of war. She urges her readers,

Let us not forget that terrible war, or our brave soldiers who were thrown into Andersonville and Libby prisons, the awful agony they went through, and the most brutal treatment they received in those loathsome dens, the worst ever given human beings; and if the white soldiers were subjected to such treatment, what must have been the horrors inflicted on the negro soldiers in their prison pens?⁶⁴⁷

Drawing attention to the condition and treatment of Union prisoners made an emotional appeal that was still quite powerful for veterans and their families; it not only reminded them of the terrible cost of the war, in human life, which both sides suffered, but the inhumanity of Confederates who treated their captured “brothers in arms” like animals.

Octavia V. Rogers Albert’s memoir also includes detailed descriptions of the treatment of Union prisoners of war. Albert was born a slave in Georgia in 1853 and gained emancipation at the end of the Civil War.⁶⁴⁸ After moving to Louisiana with her husband and daughter in the mid-1870s, she became acquainted with a number of former slaves in the community and through her husband’s work at the church. After many conversations with former slave Charlotte Brooks, Albert decided to write her life story.⁶⁴⁹ She went on to interview another six former slaves and

⁶⁴⁶ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 42-44.

⁶⁴⁷ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 68.

⁶⁴⁸ Albert, *House of Bondage*, xv.

⁶⁴⁹ Albert, *House of Bondage*, 2, 27.

wrote about their conversations, too. Immediately following Albert's death, her husband published some of Albert's writing as a serial story in the African American newspaper, the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*. It received such a favorable response that he and his daughter prepared the manuscript for publication as a book.⁶⁵⁰ Albert did not write her own story, possibly because she was still a young girl during slavery and the years of the Civil War. But she did record the testimony of three women and four men.⁶⁵¹ Interestingly, her male interview subjects are the only ones who discuss the Union army in any detail. Colonel Douglas Wilson was a former slave and a soldier in the war, so his memories of the larger conflict were shaped by his direct participation. John Goodwin did not fight in the war, but remembered those times and stories he had been told by other African American men.

Like Taylor, Colonel Douglas Wilson and John Goodwin also spoke about the Union soldiers' prison camps in awful detail. Goodwin told Albert that he had heard about blood-hounds being used to chase the Yankees who tried to escape from Andersonville. Reporting on what he was told second-hand, Goodman told her, "... 'He told me he had seen many Yankees bitten almost to death by the blood-hounds. He said they used to get out of the stockade and run just like we poor darkies did, with the dogs right behind them.'" This image tied the abuse and violence against

⁶⁵⁰ Albert, *House of Bondage*, v-vi.

⁶⁵¹ Rogers speaks to Charlotte Brooks, John and Lorendo Goodwin (husband and wife), Sallie Smith, Stephen Johnson, "Uncle" Cephas, and Colonel Douglass Wilson. Several of these individuals, in turn, speak about the experiences of other slaves that they knew or heard about; 6 of those additional figures are women and 6 are men: Jane Lee, Nellie Johnson, Sam Wilson, Richard, Lena, Ella, George, Hattie, Silas, Lizzie, Cato, and an unnamed cousin of Lorendo Goodwin.

white Union soldiers to the violence and dehumanization regularly suffered by slaves, likening the escaping soldiers to hunted fugitives who ran for their lives. Goodwin told Albert that white women used to visit the stockade to look at the prisoners and curse them. "... 'There they were, dumb and helpless, some dead, some dying, and others almost starved to death. And a Christian woman, so called, cried out to them, 'I wish God would rain fire and brimstone down on your heads!'" Albert cursed the place that "reduced [such men] to a level with the brutes," and reminded her readers that the site where "thirteen thousand and seven hundred souls ... perished" would "never be erased from the annals of history."⁶⁵²

In her study of black and white comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), Barbara Gannon argues that the trauma of the Civil War was a powerful force in uniting black and white Union veterans post-emancipation. Gannon writes, "Northern veterans' memories of wartime suffering," including in prisoner of war camps, "defined much of their collective Civil War Memory."⁶⁵³ It was the memory of their shared experience of "wartime suffering ... that created the interracial bond between black and white veterans."⁶⁵⁴ She also notes that white GAR members were most likely to support black protests over instances of racial discrimination or violence when it was shown that white northerners were suffering too. In reminding readers of the prisoner of war camps and the way that white Union soldiers were also dehumanized and made to suffer, Taylor and Albert

⁶⁵² Albert, *House of Bondage*, 83-85.

⁶⁵³ Barbara Gannon purposefully capitalizes the term "Memory" in her text whenever she refers to collective memory, in contrast to the memories of individuals. Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011), 3, 10.

⁶⁵⁴ Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 6-7. For her discussion of prisoner of war camps, see 127-128.

appealed to whites' sense of personal interest and implicitly suggested that their enemy was so determined to hold onto slavery that it made them treat white northerners like slaves too; brutalizing and dehumanizing them in the prison camps and chasing after them with dogs, just like they did with fugitives. More important in some ways than simply recognizing or acknowledging African American men's participation in the military battles, these written descriptions of the prisoner of war camps evoked an image of the white South as enemy. Depicting white and black Union vets' shared experience of suffering may have been helpful in challenging reconciliationists' vision of the meaning of men's wartime suffering, but it was most important in creating a representation of those who made them suffer. Susie King Taylor powerfully drives this point home when she asks her readers, "Can we forget those cruelties? No, though we try to forgive and say, 'No North, no South,' and hope to see it in reality before the last comrade passes away." As mentioned previously, she credits African American women with offering assistance and support to Union prisoners of war, helping men hide and get away, as well as bringing food to those who were living in stockades "worse than pigs."⁶⁵⁵

Taylor's narrative also offered a reminder of what the war was about. She again echoes Douglass, whose 1878 address not only asked his audience to remember that there was a right and a wrong side to the war, but also insisted, "... let us have peace, but let us have liberty, law and justice first."⁶⁵⁶ In her chapter on the "Mustering Out" of the South Carolina Volunteers, Taylor includes the full text of

⁶⁵⁵ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 68.

⁶⁵⁶ Douglass, "Speech in Madison Square in Honor of Decoration Day," 470.

the general orders which were read to the regiment by Lt. Colonel C. T. Trowbridge on February 9, 1866. Trowbridge praised the valor and heroism of the company, along with all African American soldiers,

... by whose efforts, united with those of the white man, armed rebellion has been conquered, the millions of bondsmen have been emancipated, and the fundamental law of the land has been so altered as to remove forever the possibility of human slavery being established within the borders of redeemed America.

Trowbridge praises their bravery and service, comments on the changed nature of the nation, acknowledges the lives that were lost, including the heroic Colonel Shaw and his regiment. He concludes by admonishing the men to put down their arms, lay aside the wrongs of the past, and prove their fitness for citizenship by “seek[ing] in the paths of honesty, virtue, sobriety, and industry, and by a willing obedience to the laws of the land.” Although there is a note of paternalism in his remarks, Trowbridge does suggest that the men have earned something more than basic freedom. Along with “the right forever to be free,” Trowbridge tells these men that “The nation guarantees to you full protection and justice.”⁶⁵⁷ More than three decades distant from the war, Taylor’s inclusion of this text reminded readers of what the war had meant *then*. She allowed Trowbridge, a respected, heroic, white Civil War officer and veteran, to speak again, in his own words, about the meaning of the war and of black military service. The orders were a reminder that, by war’s end, eradicating slavery from the nation was as important as restoring the Union. They were a reminder of African American men’s readiness to fight; their patriotism

⁶⁵⁷ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 46-50.

and bravery; and their critical role in winning the war. They were a reminder, too, that freedom had been accompanied by promises of citizenship, full protection, and justice.⁶⁵⁸

In her penultimate chapter, Taylor makes this connection explicit for her readers. She writes,

I wonder if our white fellow men realize the true sense or meaning of brotherhood? For two hundred years we had toiled for them; the war of 1861 came and was ended, and we thought our race was forever freed from bondage, and that the two races could live in unity with each other, but when we read almost every day of what is being done to my race by some whites in the South, I sometimes ask, 'Was the war in vain? Has it brought freedom, in the full sense of the word, or has it not made our condition more hopeless?'

In this 'land of the free' we are burned, tortured, and denied a fair trial, murdered for any imaginary wrong conceived in the brain of the negro-hating white man. There is no redress for us from a government which promised to protect all under its flag.⁶⁵⁹

Taylor powerfully connects the memory of the Civil War to the reality of racial violence in the turn-of-the-century South. She questions the meaning and worth of "freedom" in a society where African Americans' basic rights are violated without recourse. Taylor writes, "I may not live to see it, but the time is approaching when the South will again have cause to repent for the blood it has shed of innocent black men, for their blood cries out for vengeance." Contrasting her postwar experience in the North and South, Taylor praises New England and Massachusetts as the first places where she "found liberty in the full sense of the word," but by exposing the

⁶⁵⁸ Taylor's attention to her own and other African American women's wartime service implicitly reminded whites that the same justice was due to all African Americans, regardless of whether they took up arms in the war.

⁶⁵⁹ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 61-62.

ongoing racial hatred and violence in the South, she implicitly challenges white northerners to intervene, to make the liberty and justice which African Americans are owed a reality across the nation.⁶⁶⁰ Returning to a policy of non-interference is not an option post-emancipation; that choice, she suggests, makes the terrible suffering of the war all for naught.

As mentioned previously, Susie King Taylor's narrative is unique among women's postbellum slave narratives for its overwhelming focus on the Civil War and the Union Army. These do not emerge as central themes for any of the male writers examined for this study, either; although a number of the male authors do give attention to the Civil War as part of their larger narrative project. As was true for the women writers, most of the men write about the war in terms of what they personally experienced and witnessed in that context. For a number of the authors, those personal experiences were limited for various reasons: some were children during those years; some did not gain freedom until the end of the war and remained on their owners' rural property, where they had less exposure to wartime events; some gained freedom in the antebellum and were no longer living in the South during the conflict. Robert Anderson, who purchased his freedom and that of his wife in the antebellum era, makes only a few passing references to the war and emancipation as a time-marker for other events in his life.⁶⁶¹ Thomas Johnson

⁶⁶⁰ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 62-63.

⁶⁶¹ He writes that he preached during the days of slavery, "until the bells were rung that informed us that we were freed." He also mentions that he brought his mother to live with him and, although she

accompanied the Confederate Army with his master, as a cook, but returned home after his master died and ownership passed to his mistress. He remembered the siege of Richmond and how slaves rejoiced when the Union Army took possession of the city.⁶⁶² For whatever reason, a number of the men and women who published narratives post-1865 did not place particular narrative importance on the Civil War, in the larger context of their lives or their purpose for writing.⁶⁶³

Male writers who gave more attention to the Civil War in their published works often wrote about the war as a struggle for freedom; remembered the service of African American troops; and pointed to the need (and current failure) to protect and defend black rights post-emancipation. William Wells Brown's 1880 narrative, *My Southern Home*, provides a useful example for exploring these patterns. Brown's work is unusual because it is not primarily about his own experiences, which he had already documented and represented in his 1849 narrative; he only inserts himself into the action of the story, with the first-person "I," a handful of times. Otherwise, he is present as author and assumes the authority to represent and discuss conditions in the South before and after the war, beyond telling his personal story. Perhaps because of this degree of separation, Brown gives more attention to the Civil War than other male writers who only discussed it in terms of their limited

lived to see "Mr. Freedom" come, she passed away shortly thereafter. See Anderson, *The Life of Rev. Robert Anderson*, 24, 38-39.

⁶⁶² Johnson, *Africa for Christ*, 25-26.

⁶⁶³ William Parker, Francis Frederick, and Thomas Burton do not mention the war at all. For examples of other male narratives that engage with the Civil War relatively briefly, see Charlton, *Sketch of the Life of Mr. Lewis Charlton*, 7; Smith, *Fifty Years of Slavery*, 116-122; Jeter, *Pastor Henry N. Jeter's Twenty-Five Years Experience with the Shiloh Baptist Church*, 15; 19-20; Walker, *Buried Alive*, 57-59.

personal experience. Brown portrays the war as undeniably being a conflict over slavery, writing in detail about increasing sectional conflict over the slavery issue in the 1850s. Brown describes slave-holding interests as being successful “in controlling the affairs of the National Government for a long series of years,” and gives multiple examples of Southern Democrats defending slavery, the slave trade, slave labor over free labor, and the expansion of slavery into free territory in legislative discussions. Brown argues that the pro-slavery Democrats felt deeply threatened and attacked by the “Black Republican party” and “did much to widen the breach, and to bring on the conflict of arms that soon followed.”⁶⁶⁴

Brown’s description of the war itself is entirely focused on emancipation, rendered in an imagined scene of a Union soldier reading the Emancipation Proclamation to a group of joyful and grateful slaves in a “negro cabin.” It becomes a comical scene with dialect-driven conversation among the slaves, singing, and stories – more of the “local color” that Brown represents throughout the narrative. Appended to this is a more serious story of one man among the crowd who ran away years ago, has returned to the South as a servant for a Union officer, and is now trying to find word of the family members he left behind. Brown recreates a tearful scene when the man is reunited with his mother.⁶⁶⁵ Only later, in his discussion of racial strife post-Reconstruction, does Brown refer obliquely to African Americans’ participation in the war as soldiers. He criticizes the Republican Party for abandoning blacks to the former Rebels “after using [them] in the war, and

⁶⁶⁴ Brown, *My Southern Home*, 144-154.

⁶⁶⁵ Brown, *My Southern Home*, 154-163.

at the ballot box;” in this, he writes, they showed “the most bare-faced ingratitude that history gives any account of.”⁶⁶⁶ Brown speaks of the hatred which southerners had for “their ex-slaves” and argues that “it was the duty of the nation, having once clothed the colored man with the rights of citizenship and promised him in the Constitution full protection for those rights, to keep this promise most sacredly.”⁶⁶⁷ This was a promise that Susie King Taylor continued to hold the North accountable to twenty years later. In the absence of sustained Northern interest and involvement, Brown concluded that “Through fear, intimidation, assassination, and all the horrors that barbarism can invent, every right of the negro in the Southern States is to-day at an end.”⁶⁶⁸

Norvel Blair and Jared Maurice Arter write more directly about the contributions of African American troops in their narratives. Blair is very much writing to indict the Republican Party, who he sees as “mak[ing] pretensions to love and protect our race—all for the purpose of getting our votes.”⁶⁶⁹ In this context, Blair repeatedly challenges white Republicans’ claims of freeing the race and argues that African American soldiers fought for their own freedom. Blair writes, “I say the

⁶⁶⁶ Brown, *My Southern Home*, 182.

⁶⁶⁷ Brown, *My Southern Home*, 165.

⁶⁶⁸ Brown, *My Southern Home*, 166. It is important to acknowledge that Brown does not end the memoir on this note, as Susie King Taylor did. These forceful words are followed by another 80 pages in which Brown continues to explore “local color” in the South post-war, including descriptions of freedpeople who now enjoyed the freedom to go to town and spend their money on finery and whiskey; African Americans who were not always prepared for their new roles in government; freedpeople’s need for instruction in religion, health, and cleanliness; as well as the advancements that some members of the race were making. Brown’s argument about the nation’s failure to fulfill the promises of freedom loses some of its forcefulness when it is but one of many subjects he addresses.

⁶⁶⁹ Blair, *Book for the People*, 3. Blair draws larger conclusions, but this is also personal for him – most of the narrative details how he was repeatedly cheated out of money and property by duplicitous white Republicans in office in the South.

Republicans did not free us--we fought on the battlefield for our freedom, and the North would never have gained the battles had it not been for the colored people ... Now they said we were freemen, but only freemen so long as they can vote us and get our labor for nothing.”⁶⁷⁰ While William Wells Brown criticizes Republicans for abandoning blacks in the South, Norvel Blair argues that Republican carpetbaggers are actively exploiting African Americans post-war. Both men represent this as a betrayal of the contributions African American soldiers made to the Union war effort and portray white Republicans as false allies.

Although he comments on the persistence of “bitter prejudice, injustice and maltreatment,” Jared Maurice Arter’s praise for African American soldiers is not tied to criticism of the Republican Party. Born in 1850, Arter does write about a few personal memories of the Civil War in his autobiography, but he engages with the war more broadly in the several speeches and sermons he appends to the book. Arter earned his Ph.D. and was ordained to the ministry in the 1880s; as a preacher and a teacher at different institutions and churches, he had occasion to deliver a number of addresses on topics that included the history of the race, the 50th anniversary of emancipation, and the 105th anniversary of Lincoln’s birthday. In these documents, Arter often drew attention to the heroism, bravery, and contributions of African American soldiers, who he described as having “the exalted privilege of helping to save the Union and to assist in accomplishing his own emancipation from slavery.”⁶⁷¹ African American soldiers’ service becomes part of

⁶⁷⁰ Blair, *Book for the People*, 15-16.

⁶⁷¹ Arter, *Echoes of a Pioneer Life*, 77-79, 114.

an emancipationist narrative that continued to honor Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Union Army more broadly.

How do men's narratives of the Civil War compare to the representations created by Susie King Taylor and other women writers? None of the men in this sample were veterans of the Civil War, which means that Taylor and Octavia Virginia Rogers Albert (through her interviews) engage with more specific details of the war, black and white Union soldiers' experience, and the image of the South and Confederacy as an enemy than any of these male authors. As already discussed, remembering the South as an enemy and emphasizing the shared suffering of black and white Union soldiers was important to challenging the narrative of sectional reconciliation which the nation increasingly embraced in the decades after the war. Most importantly, though, the reader may notice that African American women are absent from the representations of war constructed by these men. Susie King Taylor made a unique and critical contribution to the larger memory of black Civil War service when she inserted herself and other African American women into that narrative. The other female authors who wrote about the war in terms of how they and their families seized freedom for themselves also inserted women into a narrative that frequently credited African American soldiers with emancipating the race. Once again, the significance of women's postwar narratives is underlined by the fact that they told a story that wasn't available elsewhere. Formerly enslaved women wrote about themselves and other women as central actors in narratives about the experience of and resistance to slavery; acts of self-emancipation before

and during the war; and African American experiences during the Civil War. Men did not.

The postbellum slave narratives were published individually, over a period of many years; but in thinking about the literary marketplace, they entered a field that included other “reminiscences” of the Civil War era. Some were written by soldiers and officers; some by abolitionists; some by missionaries and teachers who went south during the war; some by former masters and mistresses, or their children. These different groups of writers were all invested in telling particular stories about that past and, thus, can be understood as contributors to the broad category of “Civil War memory.” Emancipation and black soldiers’ Civil War service were central to the collective memories which African Americans constructed and commemorated in the decades following the war. But, as this chapter has shown, universal emancipation, African American soldiers, and the larger Civil War struggle were not central to the life stories told by most female authors of postbellum slave narratives. They remembered their experience of slavery. They remembered the ways that they resisted whites’ attempts to control, define, and inflict violence on them. They remembered how they, as individuals and in company with other family members, liberated themselves from slavery before and after the war. Although most of these works were not primarily concerned with depicting the war to save the Union and free the slaves, they nonetheless made an important contribution to how the larger public understood the Civil War and what it had been fought for.

Beginning with David Blight, scholars of Civil War memory have argued that the emancipationist memory of the war – which focused on emancipation as the war’s most important consequence – was eventually overcome by a narrative of reconciliation in which the causes of the war were less important than acknowledging the shared bravery and sacrifice of white soldiers on both sides of the conflict. In more recent years, scholars like Barbara Gannon and Caroline Janney have challenged the idea that the reconciliationist narrative was so universally accepted, especially among actual veterans.⁶⁷² In her study of veterans in the Grand Army of the Republic, Gannon argues that white Union veterans *did not* forget African American soldiers’ service in the war, or slavery and emancipation’s central place in the conflict. Those memories meant that black veterans enjoyed relative political and social equality within the GAR itself, but Gannon also finds that comradeship within the organization “did not translate to civil rights victories outside the GAR ... Even white veterans who passionately embraced the Memory of black freedom made no connection between freeing slaves in 1865 and protecting their civil rights in 1895.”⁶⁷³ She does not seem troubled by that disconnect. Gannon bases her argument that white Union veterans remembered slavery on the fact that they included references to it in their grand speeches about the significance of the war. But gesturing toward “slavery” and “emancipation” in a speech is not the same thing as truly remembering or understanding its significance. It is also critical to note that remembering “emancipation” is not the same thing as remembering

⁶⁷² Gannon, *The Won Cause*; Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁶⁷³ Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 7-8.

“slavery.” White Union veterans could remember emancipation as one of the spoils of war without having to think more deeply about *what* it brought to an end. With emancipation detached from the long history, experience, and meaning of slavery, it is easier to understand how some white Union veterans could have seen no connection between emancipation and black civil rights.

Although it has received less focused attention in some of the scholarship, the way that different groups remembered and constructed representations of slavery was important to how they understood the Civil War. Gannon argues that

While scholars have emphasized amnesia regarding slavery, forgetting secession and disunion may have been more important to this nationalistic agenda. By the early twentieth century, white Americans’ romantic notions of American slavery made the southern defense of this institution more acceptable; slavers, but not traitors, could be American heroes.⁶⁷⁴

The romanticized idea of slavery which Gannon refers to was actively constructed by a particular set of actors who were invested in telling a particular story about that past. It is critical to acknowledge that it was not the only representation of slavery available in the public sphere. It was implicitly and explicitly challenged by the women authors examined in this chapter, whose detailed descriptions of their lives in slavery vehemently *denied* that a “slaver” could ever be “an American hero.” Susie King Taylor represented the white South as “enemy” in the context of the Civil War, but the other women writers also contributed to the image of white southerners as enemies. They showed their white masters’ and mistresses’ commitment to maintaining the institution of slavery and whites’ absolute control

⁶⁷⁴ Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 8.

over black bodies and black lives. They showed the violence, hostility, and pettiness of the men and women who claimed to have acted as benevolent protectors of their extended plantation families. They remembered how frightened slaveowners were that the Civil War would lead to emancipation and racial equality, the desperate measures they took to maintain authority over and continue to profit from enslaved African Americans even as hundreds of thousands of lives were lost and the republic crumbled around them. They wrote about the racial hatred and white supremacy that undergirded slavery and white southerners' continued commitment to maintaining the racial hierarchy post-emancipation. Importantly, they also wrote about the ways that they and their families struggled, resisted, and fought for freedom. If definitions of American liberty required that it be won through struggle, did these women authors not show that they – and every former slave – had *earned* freedom and was entitled to the protection of their rights?⁶⁷⁵

Just as the authors of slave narratives had done in the antebellum era, the women who wrote postbellum slave narratives humanized and individualized the figure of the slave and gave meaning to the slave experience. But they did this over the course of nearly seven decades that not only saw the erasure of black freedom from dominant narratives about the Civil War, but also brought the end of Reconstruction, a reign of terror orchestrated by the Ku Klux Klan, the violent suppression of black civil rights and political participation, unprecedented numbers

⁶⁷⁵ Stephen Kantrowitz argues “a critical dimension of American conceptions of liberty” was that “it was earned in struggle.” His understanding of struggle often privileges the direct actions of African American men, but I would argue that our definition of struggle needs to be more expansive than that. Even under the limitations of Kantrowitz’s definition, however, female authors of postbellum slave narratives demonstrated that they had earned liberty when they recounted scenes of direct action and physical resistance for the reader. See Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom*, 177.

of racially-motivated lynchings, and the institutionalization of Jim Crow. It mattered deeply that African Americans continued to write about and publicly remember slavery, black resistance, acts of self-liberation, and the cruelty and violence of white southerners during this period. As this study's comparison to a sample of male-authored postbellum slave narratives shows, it also mattered that women wrote about and thus represented themselves as central actors in these narratives of slavery, resistance, and self-emancipation.

CONCLUSION

In 1902, the United Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned the Opera House in Lexington, Kentucky to demand that they no longer permit performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The UDC and its supporters argued that the play created a false representation of slavery as a cruel institution, an especially dangerous message for new generations who had not lived through that history and might rely entirely on such public representations for their understanding of the past.⁶⁷⁶ Historian Anne E. Marshall writes that African Americans in Kentucky who protested the UDC's efforts "stressed the harmful consequences of ... editing the history of slavery." The UDC lost its battle in Lexington that year, but went on to try to ban *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performances throughout the state. In 1906, a bill passed in Kentucky which made it "... 'unlawful to present plays to this Commonwealth that are based on antagonism alleged to formerly exist between master and slave, or that excites race prejudice.'" African Americans in Kentucky tried to use the bill for their own purposes when they launched protests against Thomas Dixon's *The Clansmen* in 1906 and *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, but with limited success.⁶⁷⁷ Anne E. Marshall argues that the conflict over *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a site for larger debates about how to represent and publicly remember the history of slavery.

⁶⁷⁶ Marshall, "The 1906 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Law and the Politics of Race and Memory in Early-Twentieth-Century Kentucky," 368, 378.

⁶⁷⁷ Marshall, "The 1906 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Law and the Politics of Race and Memory in Early-Twentieth-Century Kentucky," 381-386.

In her 1902 narrative, Susie King Taylor took note of the UDC's similar attempt to prohibit *Uncle Tom's Cabin* productions in the state of Tennessee on the basis that "... 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." Reading this news, Taylor writes, "I paused and thought back a few years of the heart-rending scenes I have witnessed." In the few paragraphs that follow, Taylor recalls two alternative representations of slavery and race for the reader: one, her memory of seeing handcuffed men, women, and children walked through town to the auction block on the first Tuesday of every month when she was just a girl; and two, the spectacle of black men being lynched in the turn-of-the-century South. She writes,

Do these Confederate Daughters ever send petitions to prohibit the atrocious lynchings and wholesale murdering and torture of the negro? Do you ever hear of them fearing this would have a bad effect on the children? Which of these two, the drama or the present state of affairs, makes a degrading impression upon the minds of our young generation?⁶⁷⁸

If the United Daughters of the Confederacy objected to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* playing in Tennessee because of the bad impression it would have on the children, Taylor asked whether that was worse than the impression she gathered, as a child, watching men and women sold like cattle, or worse than the impression children might now take from the real-life drama of blacks being lynched and tortured without consequence. The three representations she refers to – the slave coffle and auction, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performance which was likely accompanied by a street parade, and the lynching of African Americans – were all public displays

⁶⁷⁸ Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, 65-66.

which bore powerful lessons for blacks and whites about the racial hierarchy before and after emancipation.

The fictionalized account of slavery represented in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and subsequent theatrical adaptations elicited very different responses from different groups; all of whom felt that something critical was at stake in representing slavery before, during, and after the Civil War. In each of the historical moments and public venues that this dissertation examines, African Americans not only objected to white attempts to distort or silence that past; they also asserted the authority of experience to actively engage the public with their *own* representations of slavery. A persistent focus on analyzing the details and problematic nature of *white* constructions of slavery, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, turns our attention away from looking at the significance of African Americans' own representations of slavery and race – representations that were often reaching (and thus had the potential to impact) the same or similar audiences.

At critical “moments” in the long nineteenth century, African Americans seized new opportunities to engage the public with their own representations of slavery, freedom, and race. These public representations became part of critical national debates about the nature and future of the institution of slavery; abolition and emancipation; the identity, humanity, and capacity of African Americans; the meanings of blackness; and the nation's willingness to honor and uphold the principles of liberty and justice on which it had been built. Each historical moment examined in this work opened new venues for representing slavery to new sets of

actors, who used multiple mediums to create and communicate their understandings of slavery and freedom. The slave narratives published in the antebellum era are the most familiar to us and certainly performed critical work, but African Americans employed the written word in many different forms, including letters to the editor, printed texts of speeches, letters and reports from their work in the contraband camps and freedmen's schools, published collections of former and fugitive slaves' testimony, plays for the stage, and the individual autobiographies written and published in the decades after the Civil War. They represented the slave experience in public speeches, in the prayers they made/offered in contraband camps, the oral testimony they gave in formal and informal spaces, and the songs they performed on the antislavery stage, at Emancipation Day celebrations, and on the formal stage of the theater.

African Americans performed their own understandings of and expectations for freedom in the ways that were available to them as individuals in particular social and historical contexts. Fugitive activists became public representatives of the slave when they claimed a place on the antislavery stage. The published slave narratives were one part of a broader repertoire which these men and women used to inform a larger public about the nature of slavery and the capacity of African Americans held within it. Asserting the authority of their own experiences, Frederick Douglass, Henry "Box" Brown, William and Ellen Craft, and Harriet Jacobs constructed and performed representations of enslaved men and women that showed that they were not entirely defined by the slave status imposed upon them. Moving beyond the image of passive, degraded victims which often emerged from

white abolitionist rhetoric, fugitive activists created a more empowering image of enslaved men and women by drawing attention to African Americans' self-sufficiency, courage, morality, and family values. These activists brought attention to the violence and trauma of slavery, including sale, family separation, and sexual exploitation and, in the process, humanized and individualized the figure of the slave. At the same time, they showed slaves' resistance to slavery and refusal to accept its terms – this was signified in their acts of running away, physical and verbal confrontations with white authorities under slavery, and their refusal to be silent about that experience once free.

The African American men and women who were categorized as “contraband” in the context of the Civil War performed important work in educating a larger public about the conditions of slavery, as well as former slaves' capacity, desire, and expectations for freedom. In speaking about their lives under slavery, contraband recalled experiences of overwork, physical and emotional abuse, family separation, sale, and the ways that many of their masters and mistresses treated them with an utter disregard for their humanity. Testifying to these experiences helped northern whites understand that the stories they had heard from fugitive slaves and read in the antebellum slave narratives were not an exaggeration or an anomaly, but rather were fundamental to the system of human bondage. In drawing attention to the true nature of slavery, contraband forced northern whites to confront what they were allowing to continue if they maintained a hands-off policy toward slavery and pushed them to embrace emancipation as an explicit part of the Union's war aims. When contraband spoke about what they endured in the process

of escape, they demonstrated their lack of contentment in bondage, their determination to be free, and their willingness to endure and sacrifice almost anything in order to gain freedom for themselves and their family members. Once they were in the contraband camps, both men and women resisted efforts to continue to define them in a servile status and worked to exercise new authority over their own bodies, dress, and public claims to membership in the nation. Some contraband women displayed their new freedom by rejecting clothing that they associated with their former status as slaves and choosing to dress and adorn themselves and their children in ways that valued their femininity and individuality. Both men and women occupied public spaces in order to participate in public commemorations and events related to the war and the nation. In the process, contraband exercised and asserted rights and freedoms which sometimes remained legally uncertain, thereby pushing the Union to acknowledge them as full members of the nation.

In the several decades following emancipation, African Americans seized new opportunities to represent race, slavery, and emancipation on the formal stage. Claiming a racial authenticity that whites in blackface lacked, African American performers asserted ownership over staged representations of blackness and slavery in the late nineteenth century. African American minstrel troupes, the all-black Hyers Sisters Dramatic Company, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers each succeeded in keeping the issue of slavery before the public during an era when the nation was moving increasingly toward amnesia and reconciliation. While African American minstrel troupes certainly engaged with some racial stereotypes in their work, they

also created an image of slavery which protected some aspects of the slave experience from white consumption and ridicule. The “happy plantation scenes” they reproduced emphasized the familial and community pleasures that slaves succeeded in carving out for themselves beyond the master’s watchful eye. The “nostalgia” songs they performed did not long for slavery, but for the landscape they had called home and the families now lost. The Hyers Sisters’ musical dramas, *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam, or The Underground Railroad*, also represented the strength of slaves’ family ties within an institution that often sought to disrupt them. They portrayed emancipation as a positive good and showed freedpeople as capable of uplift and participation in free society. The Jubilee Singers’ rendition of the sorrow songs associated with slavery recalled emotional scenes for their white northern audiences that reminded them of the sorrows of slavery. Combining this music with public agitation for African American civil rights post-emancipation, the Jubilee Singers challenged white northerners to live up to their abolitionist legacy and fulfill the promises that accompanied emancipation.

In the postbellum autobiographies written by formerly enslaved women, many of these writers continued to place value on remembering their experiences in slavery. Women remembered the familiar traumas of slavery – the chattel principle, family separation, violence and overwork – but also the ways that they tried to exercise some autonomy and control over their own lives within it. Women’s resistance, especially in response to physical and sexual violence, emerges as an important theme for several of the writers. In re-telling their experiences and actions, women exposed the brutality of white masters and mistresses, but also

showed themselves actively resisting and refusing to accept the violence that came with their slave status. Many women also placed value on telling their own stories of self-emancipation, showing the ways that families sometimes gained freedom together over a longer period of time. These representations emphasized the strength of mother-daughter bonds, represented mothers as heroic figures, and showed women as central actors in stories of emancipation in the antebellum era and in the context of the Civil War. The military conflict of the war was not a significant theme in most women's narratives, but it was important for Susie King Taylor because her own experience of the war was in travelling with a black regiment in the Union Army. Taylor's memoir contributed to Civil War memory by highlighting African American women's service and sacrifice in the context of the war; drawing attention to the shared suffering of white and black Union soldiers at the hands of the Confederate enemy; and explicitly linking the memory of the war to calls for racial justice at the turn of the century. Although Taylor writes most directly about the war itself, all of these women writers were contributing to understandings about the meaning of the Civil War when they recalled the violence of southern whites, represented their own humanity, capacity, and pursuit of freedom despite their status as slaves, and gave lie to white southerners' plantation romance and arguments regarding a benign and paternalistic bondage.

It is only by moving beyond the traditional periodization of U.S. slavery and emancipation and the typical focus on actors within a single, organized social movement, that this project succeeds in uncovering the breadth and diversity of African Americans' public representations of slavery and freedom, as well as the

diversity of actors who engaged the public in this way. These actors were not limited to those who identified with and participated in particular social and political movements – they included “contraband” men and women struggling to find footing in the war-time South; stage performers whose livelihood depended on satisfying audience expectations for “entertainment;” and individual freedpeople who wrote and published stories about their lives out of some personal motivation after the Civil War. Importantly, African American women were among this diverse set of actors – and in every historical “moment” and particular venue explored in this project, they made a critical contribution to public representations of slavery and emancipation by highlighting African American women’s experiences and participation in these narratives of slavery and freedom. The final chapter on women’s postbellum slave narratives offered a critical reminder that it *always* mattered *who* was telling the story; but this was true in every historical moment and performative venue this project has explored. The white-authored representations of slavery and race that African Americans spoke back to were deeply gendered constructions; only African American women’s public renderings of their particular experiences, choices, and actions, *as women*, could fully answer those other representations.

This timeline of black performance is actually a timeline of a particular kind of black resistance, one which was deeply tied to African Americans’ experiences and memories of slavery. Moving “from slavery to freedom” did not necessitate a shunning and forgetting of the slave past, but a reckoning with it; in their representations of slavery, slave owners, and the slave experience, African

Americans forced the larger public to reckon with that past, too. We are wrong to assume that there is some contradiction in representing slavery, in freedom. For this diverse set of actors, it was not a “degraded” past; their representations of slavery and the slave experience did not somehow trap them in that past. Whites attached an identity to those who were slaves, as part of the logic of a race-based slavery that sought to mark certain people as naturally suited for bondage. But for the African Americans who engaged the public with these representations, “slave” was not an identity – it was the status formerly imposed upon them. Remembering what was done to them was not always principally about gaining sympathy – it was also, at least partly, about putting the cruelty, violence, and indifference of their masters and mistresses on display. If representing slavery said anything about anyone’s “essential” nature, it suggested something about that of white slaveowners. In exposing the institution and in representing black resistance to it, African Americans showed their refusal to accept those attempts to define them. Remembering slavery – before a public that was trying to distort, romanticize, silence, or forget that history – could be a powerful act of resistance and exercise of freedom.

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