1st Annual Amy Matilda Cassey Essay Contest Guidelines & Rules:

Submission:

- Entries must be original and unpublished work. By submitting work to this contest, the student confirms that they are the author.
- One research essay per student. All essays must be uploaded as a PDF format.
- An online submission application must be fully completed in order for consideration: student's name, address and contact information, high school name and address, and grade level.
- Do not place your name or your school's name on any of the pages of the essay. Only the registration form should include this information.
- Faxed, emailed, or mailed essays will not be permitted unless special consideration is approved by the committee. Contact an LCP staff member if assistance is needed.
- Be sure the file is named in the following format: LastName_FirstName.pdf (example: Smith_Jane.pdf)
- All essays must be submitted through the following link https://tinyurl.com/yc7c2ghp between **February 1, 2019- May 1, 2019**.
- Submitting to the contest signals agreement to all contest rules, assent to publication and assent to public recognition as a 1st and 2nd place winner in electronic and print media. *The 1st and 2nd place winning essays will be announced and produced in a digital and/or print publication and circulated at the Juneteenth Freedom Seminar.

Length, Format & Sources:

- Required length should be between 1,000 to 1,500 words.
- All essays must be written following MLA format guideline with a reference page. The appropriate guideline should be followed for: **1)** font size and style; **2)** margin and indentation; **3)** in-text documentation, and **4)** list of works cited.
- Though the use of secondary sources are not required, use and proper citation of at least **three** primary sources from the Library Company of Philadelphia collection are required.

Content & Judging:

- Since this contest promotes the utilization of the records at the Library Company of Philadelphia, all participants must utilize the digital collection to align with the mission

of this contest: to stimulate further interest in the study of African American history and connect our scholarship and collections to the world around us. These items can be found here: http://lcpalbumproject.org

- The decision will be made no later than **June 3, 2019** and prize winners will be notified shortly after that date. All decisions are final.
- Select submissions, including the winning essay will be announced at the Juneteenth Freedom Seminar at the reception directly preceding the formal presentation, which will feature Dr. Ibram Kendi of American University. *The 1st and 2nd prize winners must be present for the seminar to accept awards: **June 20, 2019**.

Eligibility:

- Open to Greater Philadelphia Region high school students from 9th-12th grade.

Please direct any questions or concerns to the African American History Subject & Reference Librarian, Jasmine Smith at jsmith@librarycompany.org or 215-456-3181.

Questions for Student Exploration:

1. How do your experiences compare to growing up in contemporary society?
2. Do you believe that autograph albums, friendship albums and diaries exist today? If so, how do they compare or contrast?
3. How has the expansion of digital technology impacted current formats of self-reflection and community interaction?
4. What is an interesting project that you and your friends did that involved writing? Did it change your perceptions of the functions that writing serves for youth.
5. Do you think that the use of the Friendship Album is a valuable tradition?
6. Can writing save lives, if so, how?

Introduction

You may be excited to write about the friendship albums, but maybe you do not know where to begin. You're asking yourself, why this a necessary piece of information to know. And most importantly, you may wonder what these albums have to do with your life. After reading this brief history of friendship albums, you will know what they were, who used them, when they emerged, why they were created and their placement in the home and society.

Brief History

When you think of friendship albums, think Facebook posts and messages, as stated in Jasmine Nichole Cobb's *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century.* Think of the ways that you presently communicate with your family and friends who live across the street or in another country. Let's start with the What: Friendship Albums were albums manufacturers created as token gifts of friendship with an emergence in 1825. It is also important to note that they were created to mimic a handcrafted product and with technology, they were able to market them faster than an actually handcrafted item. The albums represented the significance of literacy and middle-class interests, and as a genre, they excluded antebellum African Americans. The Who: they were exclusively for white female consumers, who were thought to be socially conscious, and middle-class. These albums were placed beside the Bible and the hymnal on the center table in the parlor. This placement, metaphorically and in reality, represented high status for those who were aware of the tradition that was forming. Even though African American women were not included as the intended audience for these albums, they participated, regardless.

For African Americans, owning these albums represented popular enjoyments and relative wealth among a small group of free Black people in the early nineteenth century. There were at least two layers of significance within the friendship albums: reveal the promotion of "neatness, taste, and cultivated expression among black writers" and also those in the black community who used them for pleasure and pedagogical purposes. They were a teaching tool in literature and in penmanship for a younger generation of readers. African American women who contributed in the friendship albums realized that there was great responsibility, respectability, education, and social class that came with this tradition. Inside of the albums, one would find poems about womanhood, copied floral illustrations from instructional booklets, and gifted contributions on abolition from prominent male readers.

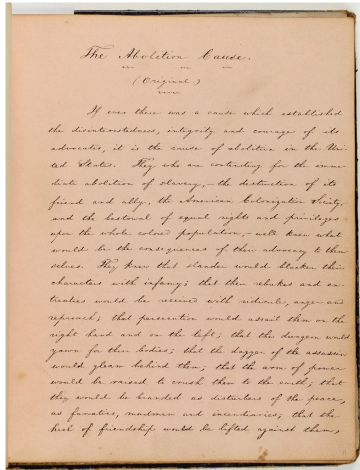
The function of the friendship albums was multifaceted, starting with connecting distant friends to showing the popular literature of the time for free black women in the antebellum North to then "asserting that free black women were worthy of sentiment" and ultimately worthy of affection. Though the focus of the albums were not political, African American women were making a political act by inserting themselves into a space that was not meant for them and turning it into a way of communicating love and care for one another. Albums from Mary Wood

Forten, Martina Dickerson, Mary Anne Dickerson, and Amy Cassey were among those of elite blacks antebellum Philadelphia. Amy Cassey's album was particularly special as it featured writings from prominent female and male abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Sarah Mapps Douglass. Ultimately, friendship albums functioned as a way to document important events that then were circulated socially instead of by the postal mail system. The albums circulated based on close proximity, such as family members, friends, spouses, and in-laws. In using friendship albums, African Americans gave themselves an opportunity to remake this tradition to work for their interests and audience. Black women posited themselves in this literary tradition and black print culture, and with their combination of words and images, they created new meanings that far surpassed the uses of the intended audience.

In this Reference Sheet, you will find primary and secondary sources that will help to provide a historical context for your research efforts. Any sources that provided are for reference usage only.

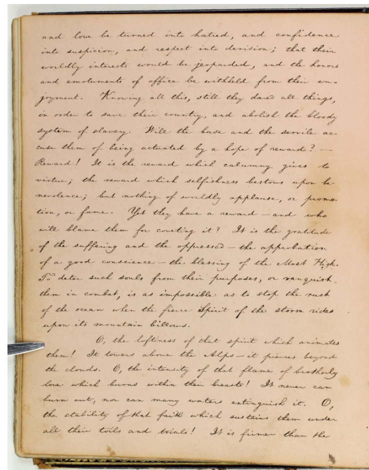
Primary Sources:

The following items are examples of materials that can be found on the Friendship Albums website.*

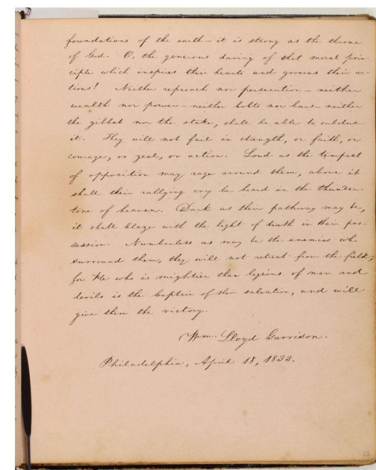

The Abolition Cause.

(Original.)

If ever there was a cause which established the disinterestedness, integrity and courage of its advocates, it is the cause of abolition in the United States. They who are contending for the immediate abolition of slavery, – the destruction of its friend and ally, the American Colonization Society, – and the bestowal of equal rights and privileges upon the whole colored population, – well knew what would be the consequences of their advocacy to themselves. They knew that slander would blacken their characters with infamy; that their rebukes and entreaties would be received with ridicule, anger and reproach; that persecution would assail them on the right hand and on the left; that the dungeon would yawn for their bodies; that the dagger of the assassin would gleam behind them; that the arm of power would be raised to crush them to the earth; that they would be branded as disturbers of the peace, as fanatics, madmen and incendiaries; that the heel of friendship would be lifted against them,


and love be turned into hatred, and confidence into suspicion, and respect into derision; that their worldly interests would be jeopardized, and the honors and emoluments of office be withheld from their enjoyment. Knowing all this, still they dared all things, in order to save their country, and abolish the bloody system of slavery. Will the base and the servile accuse them of being actuated by a hope of reward? – Reward! It is the reward which calumny gives to virtue; the reward which selfishness bestows upon benevolence; but nothing of worldly applause, or promotion, or fame. Yet they have a reward – and who will blame them for coveting it? It is the gratitude of the suffering and the oppressed – the approbation of a good conscience – the blessing of the Most High. To deter such souls from their purposes, or vanquish them in combat, is as impossible as to stop the rush of the ocean when the fierce Spirit of the storm rides upon its mountain billows.

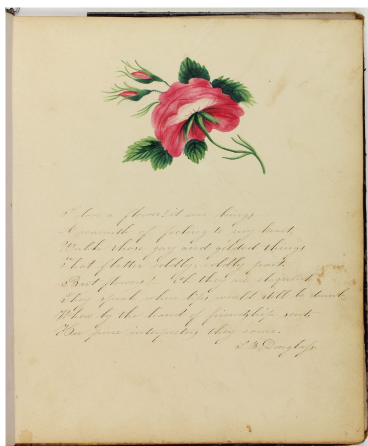
O, the loftiness of that spirit which animates them! It towers above the Alps – it pierces beyond the clouds. O, the intensity of that flame of brotherly love which burns within their breasts! It never can burn out, nor can many waters extinguish it. O, the stability of that faith which sustains them under all their toils and trials! It is firmer than the


foundations of the earth – it is strong as the throne of God. O, the generous daring of that moral principle which inspires their hearts and governs their actions! Neither reproach nor persecution – neither wealth nor power – neither bolts nor bars – neither the gibbet nor the stake, shall be able to subdue it. They will not fail in strength, or faith, or courage, or zeal, or action. Loud as the tempest of opposition may rage around them, above it shall their rallying cry be heard in the thunder-tone of heaven. Dark as their pathway may be, it shall blaze with the light of truth in their possession. Numberless as may be the enemies who surround them, they will not retreat from the field; for He who is mightier than legions of men and devils is the Captain of their salvation, and will give them the victory.

Wm. Lloyd Garrison.

Philadelphia, April 18, 1833.

The Abolition Cause. This entry is by the noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The piece is original, but many of the sentiments are not. In one of the longest pieces of this album, he honors the efforts and the resolve of those fighting to end slavery. Despite the title, this is not so much a defense or endorsement of the abolition cause, but rather an exaltation of the people involved and an acknowledgement of the personal sacrifices they have made.


I love a flower! it ever brings
A warmth of feeling to my heart,
Unlike those gay and gilded things
That flatter coldly, coldly part.
But flowers! – Oh they are eloquent
They speak when lips would still be dumb
When by the hand of friendship sent,
Her pure interpreters they come.

S. M. Douglass.

Sarah Mapps Douglass (1806-1882), a Philadelphia African American educator, contributed this transcribed entry about her appreciation of the aesthetic and symbolic value of flowers.

Secondary Sources:

Articles/Chapters:

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. "Writing for Womanhood: African American Women and Print Culture." & "A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia."*A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*, Yale University Press, New Haven; London, 2008, pp. 96–119. JSTOR.

Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. "'Forget Me Not': Free Black Women and Sentimentality." *MELUS* /, vol. 40, no. 3, Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 2015.

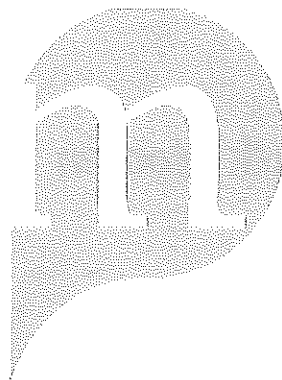
Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. A Fragile Freedom : African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City . Yale University Press, 2008.

Books:

Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century (America and the Long 19th Century)*. NYU Press, 2015.

Willson, Joseph., and Winch, Julie. The Elite of Our People : Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia . Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

*To see more information from the friendship albums, please visit the following link: http://lcpalbumproject.org



PROJECT MUSE®

"Forget Me Not": Free Black Women and Sentimentality

Jasmine Nichole Cobb

MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 40, Number 3, Fall 2015, pp. 28-46 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

⇨ For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/593051

Access provided by Drexel University (10 Dec 2018 18:25 GMT)

"Forget Me Not": Free Black Women and Sentimentality

Jasmine Nichole Cobb
Duke University

Everything about friendship albums of the early nineteenth century indicates that they were exclusively for white consumers. Unique artifacts, manufacturers produced blank volumes with decorative covers—variously known as scrapbooks, friendship albums, or giftbooks—for inscription and display.[1] Emerging around 1825, these mass-produced items (ranging in price from about two to five dollars) were "placed beside the Bible and the hymnal on the center table in the parlor" (Adelson 646) to represent the gentility of the lady of the house. Album manufacturers created these token gifts of friendship for "socially conscious middle-class women," white women who placed their albums where they might be appreciated in "places of honor on hundreds of parlor tables" (Wolf 3). Albums represent the commodification of print. Manufacturers produced these items to mimic handcraft, but with technological developments such as the steam-powered printing press, lithography, the availability of paper in rolls, and cloth binding, newer items could imitate the old integrity while appearing on the market faster than ever before. The move from stamped bindings pressed by hand with a woodcut to embossed covers, which used a steel or brass plate to engrave in one maneuver, made most friendship albums very fashionable and too expensive for most folk markets. In its signification of literacy and middle-class appetite, the friendship album as genre excluded antebellum African Americans.

Yet black women of the early nineteenth century also owned and maintained friendship albums. Items that belonged to black writers feature ornate Moroccan leather covers with intricate designs of ovals and lyres pressed into the leather. Roughly eleven-by-nine in dimension, some with more than seventy leaves of paper, these items were large, and guest contributors filled them with many mementoes. Black women's albums bear special inclusions such as gold leaf embossing and quality paper that indicate their excellence among similar items. Free African Americans likely gifted scrapbooks to loved ones during special occasions or holiday seasons. Their friendship albums were for exhibition because owning an album of value represented one's popular enjoyments and relative wealth among a small cadre of free black people in the early nineteenth century. Fine items such as African American friendship albums portrayed opulence

© MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States 2015. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States.
All rights reserved. For Permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.
DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlv020

and prestige, whether open or closed. On the inside, these albums reveal the promotion of "neatness, taste, and cultivated expression" (Lapsansky 22) among black writers, who used these items for pleasure and to administer lessons in literature and penmanship to younger generations of readers.[2] Presumably, African American women who contributed to friendship albums recognized that this genre of writing reflected their commitments to respectability, education, and social uplift. Album entries included poems about womanhood, copied floral illustrations from instructional booklets, and gifted contributions on abolition from prominent male readers. Although many black abolitionists supported free produce, refusing cotton and sugar produced by slave labor, it is unclear if this abstention pertained to their paper products.[3] Decorative scrapbooks were part of a prolific black print culture that also included diaries, letters, pamphlets, petitions, and newspapers. African American friendship albums are special among these, however, because they illustrate the ways in which black women writers took up sentimental pastimes, reproducing popular print to suit their own practices of community.

Popular Sentiment

Sentimentalism, the chief vocabulary of the friendship album, excluded freeborn African American women from its derivative popular cultures. This philosophically derived literary discourse emphasized connections between affect and morality to render the feeling person as an ethical person. American sentimentality of the nineteenth century defined middle-class white women as affected, moral agents through a "double logic" of power and powerlessness, empowered by the "home" and excluded from the public (Samuels 4). This emphasis on domesticity and the suppression of public engagement inherently excluded black women; slavery and labor spoiled notions of virtue, home, and privacy for women of African descent. Instead, the black female body served constructions of white women's sentimentality as the "Kneeling Slave" icon, bowed to plead "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?" to white women abolitionists. Images of suffering black bodies were the touchstone of sentiment in transatlantic abolitionist movements; the enslaved supplicant loomed over black protest rhetoric in anti-slavery periodicals such as *The Liberator* and served as the enthymematic counterpart to white heroism. Enslaved black women became important symbols of white women's feelings in this rubric, and many white writers mobilized the gendered ideology of women's affective power into a site of counter-politics.[4] Accordingly, popular culture verified fantasies about sentimental white women by attaching this ideal to the image of the bondswoman. African American women were sentimental objects and not feeling subjects. This framework excluded freeborn women altogether as black women not identified with the brutality of chattel slavery lacked the affective power of suffering required to garner sympathy in mainstream print.

However, women of African descent made notable use of sentimentality in the early nineteenth century, as scholars of African American literature have revealed. Joycelyn Moody describes the development of "sympathy or psychic connection," where itinerant preachers Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw employed sentimentalism in their spiritual autobiographies to "buttress their texts against white contempt and dismissal" (20). Likewise, P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that African American women used sentimentalism's conventions as "camouflage" so that presuppositions about thinking and feeling would mask the intersectional critiques in nineteenth-century works such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) or Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) (7). This scholarship uncovers the ways in which black women writers made productive use of sentimental affect even in the context of slavery and amid explicit limitations on black women's writing. This work demonstrates that with sentimental modes of literary production, African American women writers addressed the exigencies of the moment without giving way to critiques of sentimental frivolousness.

Friendship albums add to what we know about black women and sentimentality by revealing the ways in which women writers engaged this exclusive popular literature for black audiences. Freeborn elite women discussed politics and education in other forms of antebellum print, but friendship albums were places for black women's sentiment. They often used words and images to create multivalent meanings and to navigate the dictates of album writing. Black women's albums functioned "simultextually" to "address multiple audiences simultaneously."[5] African American women writers made productive use of the seemingly dissonant gap between literary sentimentalism and the need for "dialogic complexity" (Foreman 7) in texts that circulated to whites and free black men. Friendship albums are important examples of early nineteenth-century African American print culture because they evidence free blacks as readers, writers, and artists with no particular focus on slavery or abolition.[6] Friendship albums were not for publicizing the atrocities of bondage; these items were not explicitly part of the "counter publicity" (Brooks 75) tradition penned in newspapers or pamphlets focused on critiques of inequality. While some contributors discussed slavery, writing against injustice was not the explicit motivation of the friendship album. These print artifacts meet Eric Gardner's charge—that scholars expand notions of nineteenth-century African American print beyond the bound book and beyond the slave narrative—to reveal how early African Americans thought about a particular literary genre (9).[7] Friendship albums document sentimental feelings in beautiful bindings and feature contributions from multiple authors, including prominent men in intimate relationships with free black women. These items speak to Frances Smith Foster's assertion about the diversity of topics in early African American print culture, where writers saw print as a chance "to develop their moral, spiritual, intellectual, and artistic selves" (715). Friendship albums provide an enduring record of black print culture that is

not bound to a specific organization or political cause, such as abolition, and therefore provide fodder for a host of insights, which scholars can read individually or comparatively against other genres of writing.

It is difficult to estimate just how many friendship albums remain intact across racial lines but especially hard to number extant albums that belonged to black women. Whereas albums were used for writing poems and painting nature scenes, there may exist unidentified items that do not seem addressed to black audiences or scrapbooks hidden under racial ambiguity. However, as historians have revealed, friendship albums were prominent in New England and the mid-Atlantic region; thus, there may exist many albums that belonged to free blacks that have yet to be identified. Presently, there are four intact African American women's albums that circulated around an interconnected community of free people in the antebellum North. Mary Wood Forten, Martina Dickerson, Mary Anne Dickerson, and Amy Cassey were among a cadre of elite blacks in antebellum Philadelphia. Wood Forten married into the Forten family of Philadelphia—the esteemed abolitionists, anchored by prolific women writers such as Sarah Louisa Forten and Charlotte Forten Grimké.[8] Wood Forten's album is located at Howard University's Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center. The Dickerson sisters were born to working parents, Martin Dickerson, "a self-freed slave who worked as a male nurse," and his wife, Adelia, who worked as a bartender in the Walnut Street Theater until her death in 1877 (Lapsansky 17). Since the Dickersons were young girls when they received their albums, they may have had less control over who contributed, but as pupils of a vibrant free black community, they undoubtedly welcomed entries, nonetheless. Their albums reside at the Library Company of Philadelphia along with the album of Amy Cassey, representing an intricate network of free blacks, such as William Whipper and Patrick Henry Reason, but also prominent friends of the free black community, such as William Lloyd Garrison.

The Cassey album is special among these artifacts. She curated a friendship album that featured writings from prominent abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass, but also from black women abolitionists from important families throughout the Northeast. Sarah Mapps Douglass, a member of Philadelphia's free community, produced various essays for the anti-slavery *Liberator*, organized abolitionist activities, taught black students at different educational institutions throughout the city, and contributed several entries to Cassey's scrapbook.[9] Sarah Douglass and intimate friends who lived in close proximity were able to exchange albums, taking items home and returning them on completion, but Frederick Douglass and other out of town guests to the Cassey home contributed while visiting.[10] Accordingly, black friendship albums document personal encounters as scrapbook circulation relied on social contact and not postal mail. Cassey's album also represents her commitment to literary culture, which inspired her initiation of the first mixed-gender reading society for black Philadelphians, the

Gilbert Lyceum, and her wielding of the pen to file suit against a Boston theater for ejection in 1853. Cassey's album was one part of a larger social practice as she actively cultivated black print culture in the early nineteenth century.

Born in 1809 to Peter and Sarah Williams, a prominent New York City family, and widowed wife to businessperson Joseph Cassey before marrying Massachusetts activist Charles Lenox Remond in 1850, Cassey maintained her elite standing across black communities of different locales. Her album circulated among free blacks and abolitionist whites from 1833 to 1856 between Boston and Baltimore. The album indicates Cassey's powerful network as it met the hands of many prominent contributors, and it reveals the owner as a leader among women in free black communities. Cassey, in particular, represents a kind of curator/editor through the album's circulation—a notable merit of the early nineteenth century as black women editors of periodicals did not arise until the 1850s, beginning with Mary Ann Shadd Cary's *Provincial Freeman*. Cassey invited contributors and determined the tone of the writing in an age when black periodicals such as the *Freedom's Journal* and the *Colored American* contemplated the inclusion of women's writing.[11]

African American albums situate women's writing at the intersection of select privileges and the strictures of nineteenth-century gender norms. Cassey and friends were prominent anti-slavery activists and members of Philadelphia's elite black community. Many album contributors were born to free parents who were wealthy by early nineteenth-century standards, but it was the commitment to uplift that characterized elite blacks, in addition to business ownership, institutional leadership, and literary production.[12] "For African Americans, middle-class status was often elusive and, if attained, always precarious" as slavery and racism threatened "the stability of their own financial and social status" (Dunbar, *Fragile* 121). Some black women worked for income but also to serve the needs of their communities. Unlike wealthy whites who could use money to avoid social justice initiatives, middle-class and wealthy blacks used their incomes to fund mutual aid efforts and the abolitionist crusade.

Yet the purchasing power of the free black community did not construct African American women as ideal consumers of women's print culture—a growing market that included giftbook annuals and women's magazines such as *Godey's Lady Book* by the 1820s. Black women owned albums produced explicitly for middle-class white consumers, indicated by a number of preprinted scenes of sentimental white children and white women that appear in the pages of black albums. While one London manufacturer printed an image of a white child, titled "A Mother's Joy," inside the first sheet of Mary Anne Dickerson's album, the subsequent page bearing an original poem of the same title speaks to the multiple subversions that will follow:

> Thine is a happy lot sweet boy;
> Oh! What mine were the same,

Like thee, to be my mother's joy,
Like thee, to lisp her name.
My mother's spirit, long has fled
This world of woe, and pain,
But I do hope, although she's dead,
To meet with her again. (Mary Anne Dickerson 2)

Charlotte Forten, author of the poem and matriarch of the Forten family, may have taken inspiration from the mass-produced illustration, but her account of "A Mother's Joy" also acknowledged the "world of woe, and pain" that antebellum blacks inhabited and managed through belief in an afterlife. While the specter of white women's sentiment haunted the album, African American women navigated such norms by writing with regard to the specificity of their own needs.

Sentimental images of flowers in vases and sweet words might appear like ordinary entries in the friendship album genre. Items offered in celebration of "the virtues of the album's owner," including her "piety, sincerity, loyalty, innocence and beauty" (Kelly 77), resemble the gifts that typified white women's scrapbooks. However, freeborn African American women of the early nineteenth century had a real need to demonstrate their womanhood and have it recognized by others, including allies of their communities. "African American women 'wrote for true womanhood'" through their contributions to friendship albums (Dunbar, "Writing" 301).[13] These items provide a glimpse into the practices of free women who recognized each other as feeling, moral agents despite the limited scope of sentimental popular culture. Below, I discuss the multivalent meanings in black women's friendship albums and parse the complicated literary gifts penned by freeborn women writers. Free black women engaged the openness of the album with both visual and literary invention to make multifaceted use of the album page—a place for recognition and regulation along gender lines.

Functional Friendships

Readers of African American friendship albums encountered repeated emphasis on gender distinctions when perusing sentimental poems and drawings. Sentimentalism in friendship albums helped African American women celebrate values such as virtue, chastity, and motherhood. Albums were prime spaces for demarcating these ideals because they circulated to close kin, such as parents, spouses, in-laws, siblings, and friends, with identified authors on most entries. African American friendship albums also helped tether dispersed communities of free blacks, strengthening bonds and documenting kinship ties across long distances. For example, Mary Anne Dickerson recorded the dates and times of major life events in her album, including marriages, births, and deaths. Relatedly, Wood Forten maintained an album that reflects the many connections of her in-laws, the esteemed Forten family. At the same time, the album put her relationships on

display to her community, including her father-in-law James Forten, who read the album and gifted entries.

Given these bonds, sentiments about black women's emotional lives are commonplace in friendship albums. Marriage, for instance, is a recurring topic, with both opaque and straightforward treatments. Wood Forten offered "Good Wives" as a gift to the Cassey album, a popular poem that resembles both a joke about marriage and a dedication to gender normativity in lines that recount proper decorum: "Good wives like echoes still should do / Speak but when they are spoken to" (Cassey 22).[14] Yet albums also hosted genuine sentiment, such as activist and prolific writer Sarah Forten's original poem celebrating the Cassey marriage in 1833, in which she hoped the love Joseph "then pledg'd may never depart" (Cassey 17). Beyond marriage, black women expressed empathy about various subjects, employing "sentimentality as a vehicle to engage invited contributors" (Dunbar, *Fragile* 125) and to archive those instances of grief, loss, joy, and love that connected them to one another. Margaretta Forten, daughter of James Forten and sister-in-law to Wood Forten, added a poem about memory and loss to the Cassey album to explicitly address strain on African American women's friendships:

> What 'tho the wave of ceaseless motion
> Protracts the union of our lot;—
> Our hope's the rock which sterns Time's ocean;
> Our love's the flower, "Forget me not." (Cassey 14)

Such notes and recurring illustrations of forget-me-not floral bouquets indicate affection among black women as a marker of women's writing. Similar to many other nineteenth-century female friendships, black women's feelings of love seemed "both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage," suggesting "their heterosocial and their homosocial worlds were complimentary" (Smith-Rosenberg 59). Expressions of hurt alongside affection show that freeborn black women shared a range of emotions with one another through album writing. Whether loving acknowledgements of marriage or sentimental notes of longing, black women expressed feelings in album pages that helped underscore a capacity for sentimentality.

While women writers exhibited commitment to obligations of womanhood, African American men also handled albums in ways that accentuated the distinctions of gender. Frederick Douglass began his June 1850 gift to Cassey by exclaiming, "I never feel more entirely out of my sphere than when presuming to write in an album." For Douglass, the very nature of album writing emphasized "beauty, elegance, and refinement," from which he felt distant given that his "habit of life, passed history, and present occupation have called into exercise all the sterner qualities of [the] head and heart." Douglass pointedly distinguished himself from other album contributors, describing his life "on stony ground gazing upon huge

rocks with farmore [sic] pleasure, than I experience while promenading the most richly cultivated garden and gazing upon the most luxurious flowers." Parsing flowers from rocks, beauty from the "sterner" head, Douglass described both his masculinity and his former enslavement as impediments that complicated album writing. His note marks the scrapbook as a place for women's literature and pleasant ruminations, a place wherein he offers an "apology for not writing something becoming the pages of [Cassey's] precious album" (Cassey 34). Douglass focused his contribution on an inability to express sentimental affection—steeped in abolition politics—to reveal his commitment to norms about men's writing even in the semiprivate terrain of women's literary space.

Similarly, freeborn artist and activist Robert Douglass, brother to Sarah Douglass, made artistic contributions that represent how men thought about friendship albums. By the early 1830s, Robert Douglass was well-known as an artist who "challenged flagrantly racist messages commonly presented to nineteenth-century audiences" (Gonzalez 6) with his own body of work. He created two album illustrations that each reflect his willingness to engage political topics. First, he re-created a popular illustration, the *First Steam Boat on the Missouri*, using pen and colored ink to draw two Native Americans, dressed in robes and feathers, standing on a rock, expressing agony at the sight of a steam boat on the horizon. Beneath the image, he copied a lengthy poem that begins: "Mannitto's power is to the white man given!" Douglass signed, dated, and cited his gift at the bottom to indicate that this entire contribution originally appeared in *Token*, a nineteenth-century giftbook, and that he copied the poem on 25 September 1841. The *Token* appeared annually, in new editions, and featured short stories from prominent writers such as Nathanial Hawthorne and poetry by Lydia Sigourney.[15] Giftbooks such as *Token* "represented the astute commodification of American print culture" and "the important relationship of the sister arts, poetry and painting" (Lehuu 78). These illustrated books capitalized on modern printing technologies and handcrafts to invite display, copy, and mass circulation. Douglass duplicated the original image and poem by hand, deftly translating the steel-engraved illustration but adding color to impassion Native American anguish with flourishes of bright red. He reproduced a popular literary gift to situate a color image of suffering men in the pages of a black woman's friendship album.

In a second illustrated contribution, Douglass gifted a poem and a drawing of the *Booroom Slave* to Mary Anne Dickerson's album. The original *Booroom Slave*, an 1827 oil portrait by Henry Thomson, depicted a woman of African descent with hands clasped on bended knee before a stormy landscape. This popular illustration resembled other abolitionist imagery of the time, conjuring both the submissive posture of Josiah Wedgewood's "Kneeling Slave" icon (which quickly came to represent the transatlantic anti-slavery movement) and the controversial

dress and style of the Cinque portrait banned from exhibition in Philadelphia.[16] However, the painting also inspired a giftbook story, the "Booroom Slave," written by Sarah Bowdich and published in 1828 in *Forget Me Not* (another annual giftbook). Bowdich names the kneeling supplicant "Inna" and details her transition from "Ashantee" [sic] royalty to bondswoman to free again. A tale of white women's activism, the story by Bowdich discusses slavery as practiced in Africa, before detailing Inna's capture by traders and salvation by a white Englishwoman. The story of Inna's supplication and white redemption via Christian guidance "parallels that of the kneeling slave" (Rappoport 34) and ideals about white female abolitionists. However, rather than draw on this story, Douglass paired his *Booroom Slave* depiction with copied excerpts from one of William Shenstone's popular elegies:

> When the grim lion urged his cruel chase,
> When the stern panther sought his midnight prey
> What fate reserved me for this Christian race?
> A race more polished, more severe than they. (Mary Anne Dickerson 3)

Douglass signed this poem "Shenstone" for the original author but initialed his entry "RD" and noted the items were "copied by request."[17] Although the abolitionist intentions of the original are somewhat ambiguous, once paired with the *Booroom Slave* illustration, the system of slavery becomes the "grim lion" or "stern panther" pursuing black people, the "midnight prey." Further, with Douglass as the author reserved for that "Christian race," African Americans may represent the "more polished" race in this iteration. Simply pairing two different items to create one new entry, Douglass complicated issues of voice and gender in this contribution. This approach to the *Booroom Slave* at once represents African American men and women and, most importantly, indicates the political license with which men engaged black scrapbooks.

The presence of men diversified black women's friendship albums and complicated the apparent meanings contained within. These items functioned as sites of surveillance because of their open design. While albums were largely recreational, they also offered up elite women for scrutiny by powerful men who policed gender norms and monitored women's printed discourse. Scrapbooks belonging to free black women put Cassey, Wood Forten, and other women on display, along with their writings. Albums, by nature, contain personal, innermost communication *as fit* for exhibition to a somewhat varied community. Friendship albums functioned as what Lauren Berlant terms "intimate publics," featuring opportunities for "consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion" (viii), and scrutiny about black women's literary practices. African American women's albums portrayed free black womanhood in ways that maintained support from power brokers such as Frederick Douglass and other male readers who engaged albums with an eye for gender decorum.

Notwithstanding men's participation, African American women's albums were for writing to other black women. Despite the presence of outsiders, black women writers used albums to express legitimate sentiment to one another and navigate the obligations of community. Ann Howell Hinton, freeborn and elite black woman of Philadelphia, gifted a flower painting and poem to Martina Dickerson:

> A mark of friendships pleasing power,
> In this small trifle see,
> And sometimes in a lonely hour,
> View it and think of me. (Martina Dickerson 73)

Hinton's gift included a painting of clustered flowers, signed with her initials "A.H.H." Her undated entry referenced the way in which albums among African American women enabled the maintenance of bonds across distances as this author intended to give her friend a reminder of their relationship. This style of contribution frequently appears in black women's albums; such notes indicate sentimental feelings and a willingness to engage black women readers as feeling subjects. This entry also makes clear that the album represents the intersection of privilege and pain in the lives of freeborn black women. Familiarity with sentimentalism indicates access to literacy education while the perpetuation of slavery and the constant threat of kidnapping or rape hovered over free women as well. The perilous nature of black life in the early nineteenth century would have made the expression of love and affection from one woman to another a necessary and even critical practice. In their choices about what to write or draw and whom to include in the pages of their albums, black women responded to the dictates of album circulation. Whereas these women took seriously the exigencies of observation and harnessed such limitations for the accrual of power, the simultaneously open yet closed space of the album necessitates a multivalent reading of black women's entries.

Picture Feeling

Black women writers managed the complicated space of the friendship album by creating contributions that engaged one another directly but resembled ordinary inscriptions. More than seventeen paintings and drawings appear in four known African American women's albums, created with and without accompanying script. Many of these depictions express sentimental feelings toward a friend while others suggest a critical component to free black women's communication with one another. Contributors who gifted floral images or sympathetic lines to these albums asserted a right to sentimentality rather than offering explicit verbal arguments about their exclusion from sentimental literature.

Copying images and prose was a common practice among men and women who offered tokens to African American friendship albums. Women writers variously copied items from mainstream books in wide circulation to create their own offerings, similar to Robert Douglass, drawing images from manuals and setting borrowed entries in quotation marks. "Citation and reprinting were common practice in antebellum print culture" (Cohen and Stein 165), and Meredith L. McGill regards a "peculiar kind of advantage" (41) for African American writers who gained access to print and deferred proscriptions on authorial identity within a culture of reprinting. Unlike black autobiographers who contended with questions of authenticity when recounting the experience of enslavement, elite African Americans writing in friendship albums did not have to relate lived experiences or verify personal narratives. A complex web of influence and institutional life proved their literacy, and copied prose often came from more widely circulated, and thus well-known, texts. Album contributors who duplicated prose and pictures revealed themselves as widely read, familiar with writing conventions and diverse literatures.

In this context, black women often coupled floral pictures with borrowed prose about flowers to create new kinds of sentimental meanings. For example, Sarah Douglass paired a painting of the underside of a wild pink rose with four lines of copied poetry to the album of Amy Cassey:

> I love a flower—it ever brings
> a warmth of feeling to the heart,
> Unlike those gay and gilded things,
> that flutter coldly, coldly part.
> But flowers! Oh, they are eloquent!
> They speak when lips would still be dumb,
> When by the hand of beauty sent,
> Her pure interpreters they come. (Cassey 9)

Douglass selected these lines from a longer original poem titled "Flowers" by a poet identified as E. J., which appeared in a November 1837 edition of *The Yale Literary Magazine,* but she created a new literary product to gift to her friend. In this sentimental token, Douglass takes on the author's persona and signifies her love of Cassey as a love of flowers. The floral image adds a corresponding vision to represent flowers that "are eloquent" and able to "speak when lips would still be dumb." This combination of image and text signals not only one black woman's love of other black women but also the larger project of recognition at work among black women readers who could "interpret" such complex contributions. Album writing "was a means of creating community," like other kinds of correspondence between black women, providing ways of "seeing themselves through each other's eyes and thereby seeing themselves as something much more than society" could fathom (Griffin 6). These entries invited identification among black women, with images for visualizing the sentimental

language of feelings and specific blocks of texts for readers to apply to the pictures.

Floral motifs were predominant tropes of sentimentalist popular cultures in the early nineteenth century. Images of roses in vases and stems of lilies correspond to the popular "language of flowers," a literary discourse that circulated throughout Britain, France, and the United States. International writers created popular interest in the language of flowers, and by the 1820s, books that listed flowers by names and by meaning were widely available. Although floral manuals offered inconsistent definitions for flowers, both from one country to another and from one manual to another, the language of flowers retained its transatlantic significance as a discourse of femininity (Seaton 18). The first flower dictionary appeared in the United States in 1829, offering consumers narrative definitions for various flowers and details on the precise art of flower painting as a masculine practice. When a London publisher printed Mrs. E. E. Perkins's *Elements of Drawing and Flower Painting: In Opaque and Transparent Water-Colour* in 1835, she addressed this focus in the foreword, explaining that the "'mind has no sex,' yet the usual and necessary forms of society restrain females from many pursuits which are open to the competition of the other sex." Although purveyors of sentimentalism excluded black women from mainstream notions of womanhood and the corollary consumer cultures, women who offered flowers to friendship albums asserted black womanhood as legible by the terms of this popular convention.

The flower and nature metaphors used in sentimental writing also paired well with black women's symbol systems. In fact, nature remained an important sign to enslaved African Americans as well, who understood the unadulterated wilderness as preferable to the "gardens" of the plantation that fit into a larger system of black exploitation (Dixon 18). Although whites attempted to make association between Blackness and animality indicative of a lack of civility, nature metaphors have been central to black women's communication with one another. Flowers remain relevant over time in black women's discourse. Even as late as the twentieth century, African American women poets of the Harlem Renaissance used floral romanticism in a media climate not very different from the antebellum era (with the Klan-inspiring *Birth of a Nation* appearing in 1915 and the expansion of racial entertainment); they, too, seemed to be writing outside the contours of black racial difference. Maureen Honey describes African American women's desire to distance themselves from cruel realities, noting that "nature offered an Edenesque alternative to the corrupted, artificial environment created by 'progress'" even as such metaphors resembled a Western writing tradition and not an "identifiably" black cadence (xxxix). The trajectory of flowers in African American women's literary and cultural production advances from antebellum writing, such as in these four friendship albums, through the twentieth-century appearance of flowers in African American women's cultural productions.[18]

Flower drawings were important because this group of women avoided depicting the black female body altogether even though women owned friendship albums and women were the primary audience for these materials. The only scene to include people drawn by a black woman appears in the Cassey album, most likely sketched by the owner. A colorless image of a "Residential New York Street" features a home as the focal point, shown as large and centered on the page (Cassey 49). The house looms in the background behind a traveling man on horseback, depicted in conversation with another person, possibly a woman. Gray-toned illustrations appear in all of the identified albums and amplify precision as an important characteristic of album drawings. Unlike the vivid color or lines of prose that accompany most writings by black women, the residential scene offers elaborate detail in pencil. Although the artist included fine particulars in the image, such as roof shingles and elaborate foliage, the human characteristics of the individuals remain obscure, and the bodies in question are gender indeterminate. The lack of color in this image accentuates the intricacy of the drawing but offers no clues about the people that appear on the page. Original items such as the New York scene place people in context and assert naturalness by depicting a sentimental sense of belonging—a sense of existing somewhere specific—for people of African descent.

In the absence of bodies, flowers often stand in for depictions of black women and female forms. Sarah Douglass created a gift for her friend and student Mary Anne Dickerson, copying lines of prose and a floral image from a tutorial flower-painting guide, most likely taken from James Andrews's 1836 text *Lessons in Flower Painting: A Series of Easy and Progressive Studies* (plate 11). Douglass copied the long branch of leaves and four-bloomed fuchsias with well-defined parts but also included lines copied from a poem to narrate a story about fuchsias for her pupil (see color plate 3). Douglass explained to Dickerson and whoever else might read the album:

> All the spears of fuchsia droop their heads toward the grounds in such a manner that their inner beauties can only be discerned when they are somewhat above the eye of the spectator. (Mary Anne Dickerson 75)

Since fuchsias typically faced the ground, one needed to *see* them as higher and more exalted to understand their *inner* beauty and not just their outer appearances. Douglass added, "for a meaner flower this might not / Attract attention but most of the fuchsias are / Eminently beautiful, both in form and color." While "meaner" flowers do not garner as much attention when looking down, the form and color of fuchsias are so "eminently beautiful" that they cannot be ignored. She concluded that "the singular and peculiar / Beauty of the parts involved in the calyx," which "they would thus seem anxious to conceal," along with the "modest rendering of the head," helped fuchsias to "Beautifully and

significantly" demonstrate modesty (75). Douglass duplicated these lines of text, which were quite popular in the 1840s, appearing in various other publications such as *Thoughts among Flowers* (1844) and *Magazine of the Rising Generation* (1846). However, Douglass re-created a new sentimental item titled "Fuchsia." This visual and narrative depiction of beauty offers a profound meditation on black womanhood and the exigencies of visibility faced by free black women in the antebellum North. With this curricular contribution, Douglass described the black female body as a token of friendship, revising mainstream texts to narrate black women's unrecognized beauty and superiority. Giving flowers and copying prose, Douglass gifted a vision of free black womanhood to her student that suited the terms of album circulation but superseded limitations on the tone and topic of black women's writing.

Conclusion

Friendship albums of the early nineteenth century were akin to Facebook of the twenty-first century. They connected distant friends and documented commonly shared beliefs and interests between the owner and her community. Inside, friendship albums reveal sentimental literature as popular among free black women in the antebellum North. They connected free women to the powerful language of feeling at a time when US abolitionists focused on enslaved black women as emblems of sentimentality. When the number of sentimental texts in circulation increased without particular regard for freeborn black women, albums were central locations for viewing free women with empathy.

African American women used friendship albums to assert that free black women were worthy of sentiment. They combined flower images and copied original prose to address one another with compassion, creating significations that may have been difficult to put in sentimental words—namely, that freeborn black women were worthy of affection (Cobb 73). Items such as "Fuchsia" invite broad interpretations, showing sentimental pastimes as useful to women who did not garner the bondswoman's sympathy from white abolitionists but remained bounded by mainstream gender ideologies in free communities. Black women writers combined words and images to create new meanings that speak more loudly than many of the original offerings from which they borrowed. These women offered contributions that might have read subversively to viewers familiar with the complicated landscape of gender ideology in the early nineteenth century, without transgressing the boundaries of respectability.

The multiple levels of meaning written into African American friendship albums archive the manner in which black writers engaged a popular print culture form, even as they were not considered an audience by mainstream producers. Not only a means for resisting slavery, black women's fluency in sentimental literature discloses this popular convention as expansive and useful

for managing intraracial community and gender politics. Black friendship albums portray one means by which free women (re)appropriated seemingly vacant spaces, such as blank scrapbooks produced for whites, and transformed them into sites for critical discourses of love among one another.

Notes

1. "*Scrapbook* has been a flexible term, used alongside *album* and *portfolio* and *commonplace book*" (Garvey 15). Despite common terms, antebellum friendship albums differed from the postbellum albums that consumers filled with newspaper clippings.
2. See also Stephen Loring Jones for a discussion of African American art in antebellum Philadelphia.
3. The free produce philosophy divided abolitionists, particularly distinguishing many white women and black activists in favor of free products from William Lloyd Garrison and members of the American Anti-Slavery Society. See Carol Faulkner.
4. For connections among affective power, abolition, and white women's rights, see Lori D. Ginzberg, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Jean Fagan Yellin.
5. P. Gabrielle Foreman explains that such meanings are "available at the primary level of narrative interpretation," written in "prose [that] creates discursive layers." Simultexts at once employ easily identifiable "allusions to oppressive and resistant dynamics" but also offer "reformist messages" within "more accommodating prose" (6).
6. For more on African American readers, see Elizabeth McHenry.
7. Eric Gardner problematizes the parameters scholars organize around African American literature in the nineteenth century, including limited focus on Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and a disciplinary bias toward bound books as the mark of literature (9).
8. Philadelphia represented one of many thriving free black communities in the antebellum North, where prominent families, including the Fortens, built institutions and contributed to a robust anti-slavery activism. Granddaughter of Charlotte and James, Sr., Charlotte Forten Grimké, activist and educator, maintained diaries that have been published in multiple forms. See Janice Sumler-Lewis, Joseph Willson, and Julie Winch.
9. An activist, educator, and writer, Sarah Mapps Douglass lectured on anatomy and physiology and taught at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia. See Marie Lindhorst.
10. See Erica Armstrong Dunbar for a discussion of the physical circulation of albums (*Fragile* 127-29).
11. Patricia Okker touches on Mary Ann Shadd Cary and other African American women editors of the 1880s, including Ida B. Wells Barnett, Amelia L.

Tilghman, Amelia E. Johnson, Julia Ringwood Coston, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin.

12. Willson, a southern migrant, penned one of the most enduring definitions of Philadelphia's "higher class" of blacks, in which membership required more than economics but also that one be "socially committed, responsible, [and] determined to work for the betterment of the whole community" (40-41).
13. For more on true womanhood, including debates, see Barbara Welter and Marie Louise Roberts.
14. "Good Wives" also appeared in a naughty book of poems that joked about premarital sex and marriage as a tedious undertaking. See Peter Pindar.
15. Giftbooks were elegant and expensive, ranging from three to fifteen dollars, offering prints or poetry for consumers to enjoy. For more on these items and on *Token*, see Isabelle Lehuu.
16. "Cinque," or Singbe Pieh, the Mende captive and leader of the revolt on board the *Amistad*, fascinated abolitionist artists who created many illustrations of his likeness. The Artist Fund Society in Philadelphia banned the iconic portrait of Cinque from exhibition despite support from prominent black abolitionists such as Robert Purvis; see Richard J. Powell and Donald Jacobs.
17. Eighteenth-century poet William Shenstone authored the original elegy, which was so popular for its abolitionist relevance at the time that Robert Douglass and many others republished the poem along with the "Booroom" image. For a prominent example, see Lydia Maria Child.
18. For prominent examples, see Alice Walker and Marita Bonner.

Works Cited

Adelson, Fred B. "Art Under Cover: American Gift-Book Illustrations." *Magazine Antiques* 126.3 (1984): 646-53. Print.

Andrews, James. *Lessons in Flower Painting: A Series of Easy and Progressive Studies.* London: Charles Tilt, 1836. Print.

Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture.* Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.

Bonner, Marita. "The Purple Flower." *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950.* Ed. Kathy A. Perkins. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 191-200. Print.

Brooks, Joanna. "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 62.1 (2005): 67-92. Print.

Cassey, Amy Matilda. Album. 1833-56. MS. African Americana Albums. Lib. Co. of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

Child, Lydia Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans.* Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833. Print.

Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*. New York: New York UP, 2015. Print.

Cohen, Lara Langer, and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012. Print.

Dickerson, Martina. Album. 1840-46. MS. African Americana Albums. Lib. Co. of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

Dickerson, Mary Anne. Album. 1833-82. MS. African Americana Albums. Lib. Co. of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

Dixon, Melvin. *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. Print.

Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008. Print.

—. "Writing for True Womanhood: African-American Women's Writings and the Antislavery Struggle." *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*. Ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. 299-318. Print.

E. J. "Flowers." *The Yale Literary Magazine* 3.1 (1837): 39. Print.

Faulkner, Carol. "The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860." *Journal of the Early Republic* 27.3 (2007): 377-405. Print.

Foreman, P. Gabrielle. *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. Print.

Foster, Frances Smith. "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture." *American Literary History* 17.4 (2005): 714-40. Print.

Gardner, Eric. *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009. Print.

Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

Ginzberg, Lori D. *Women in Antebellum Reform*. Wheeling: Harlan-Davidson, 2000. Print.

Gonzalez, Aston. "Art of Racial Politics: The Work of Robert Douglass Jr., 1833-46." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 138.1 (2014): 5-37. Print.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine, ed. *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.

Honey, Maureen, ed. *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2006. Print.

Jacobs, Donald. *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.

Jones, Stephen Loring. "A Keen Sense of the Artistic: African American Material Culture in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia." *International Review of African American Art* 12.2 (1995): 4-29. Print.

Kelly, Catherine. *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002. Print.

Lapsansky, Phillip. "Afro-Americana: Meet the Dickersons" *Annual Report of the Library Company of Philadelphia for the Year 1993.* Philadelphia: Lib. Co. of Philadelphia, 1994. Print.

Lehuu, Isabelle. *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000. Print.

Lindhorst, Marie. "Politics in a Box: Sarah Mapps Douglass and the Female Literary Association, 1831-1833." *Pennsylvania History* 65.3 (1998): 263-78. Print.

McGill, Meredith L. *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003. Print.

McHenry, Elizabeth. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies.* Durham: Duke UP, 2002. Print.

Moody, Joycelyn. *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women.* Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001. Print.

Okker, Patricia. *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors.* Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995. Print.

Perkins, Elizabeth Steele. Foreword. *Elements of Drawing and Flower Painting: In Opaque and Transparent Water-colours* London: T. Hurst, 1835. n. pag. Print.

Pindar, Peter. *Common-place Book of Humorous Poetry: Consisting of a Choice Collection of Entertaining and Original Selected Pieces.* London: T. Davison, 1826. Print.

Powell, Richard J. "Cinqué: Antislavery Portraiture and Patronage in Jacksonian America." *American Art* 11 (Fall 1997): 49-73. Print.

Rappoport, Jill. *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture.* New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

Roberts, Mary Louise. "True Womanhood Revisited." *Journal of Women's History* 14.1 (2002): 150-55. Print.

Samuels, Shirley. Introduction. *Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth Century America.* Ed. Samuels. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 3-8. Print.

Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetoric of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (1988): 28-59. Print.

Seaton, Beverly. *The Language of Flowers: A History.* Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995. Print.

Shenstone, William. *Poems of William Shenstone.* Vol. 1. London: C. Whittingham, 1822. Print.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America.* New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.

Sumler-Lewis, Janice. "Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade." *The Journal of Negro History* 66.4 (1981): 281-88. Print.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.* San Diego: Harcourt, 1983. Print.

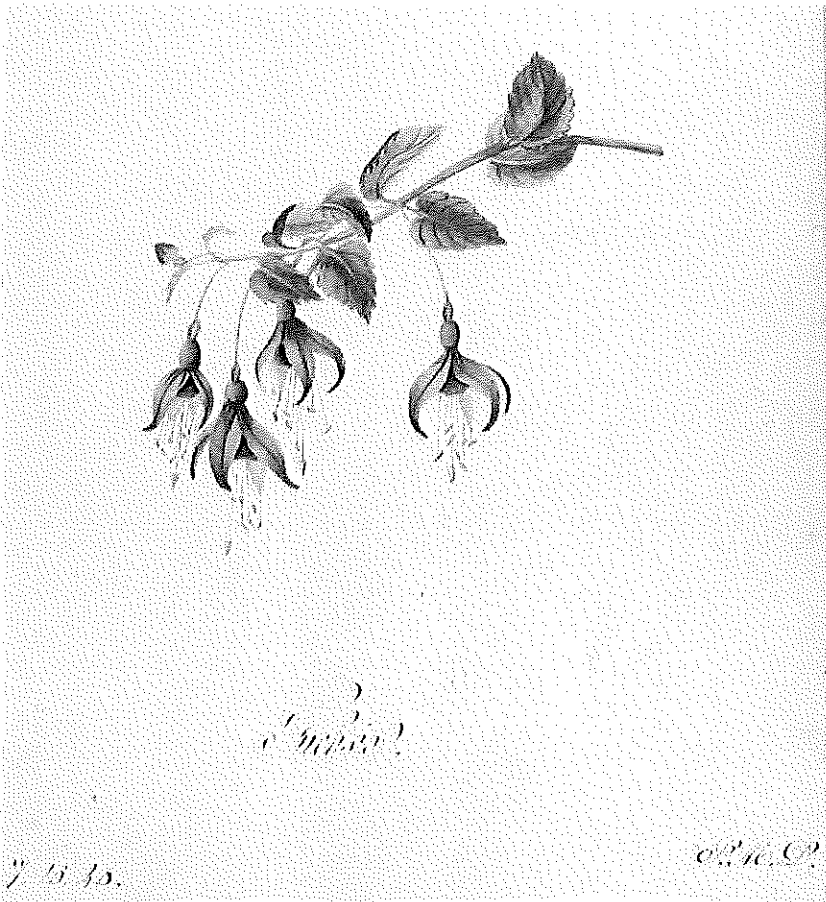
Welter, Barbara. "Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151-74. Print.

Willson, Joseph. *Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia.* 1841. Ed. Julie Winch. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2000. Print.

Winch, Julie. *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848.* Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1988. Print.

Wolf, Edwin,' II. *From Gothic Windows to Peacocks: American Embossed Leather Bindings, 1825-1855.* Philadelphia: Lib. Co. of Philadelphia, 1990. Print.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.



Color Plate 3. Sarah Mapps Douglass, "Fuchsia," Mary Anne Dickerson Album, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

Yale University Press

Chapter Title: A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia

Book Title: A Fragile Freedom
Book Subtitle: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City
Book Author(s): ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR
Published by: Yale University Press. (2008)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq0q9.11

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

Yale University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *A Fragile Freedom*

6

A Mental and Moral Feast
Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia

Readers! Within these folds you'll find
Effusions various as the mind.
From numerous prolific brains,
In sorrowful and merry strains.
This little book in prose or rhyme,
Is meant to cheat old father Time,
And so a delicious hour beguiled,
With poetry in every style.

The mid-nineteenth century was perhaps one of the most complicated eras for African American men and women of the urban North. Although constantly faced with mounting inequalities and the persistent struggle to end the institution of slavery, African American men and women continued to redefine themselves as free people living in America.[1] A foundation of free African American religious organizations and educational facilities dating back to the late eighteenth century gave rise to a politically active black elite in cities such as Philadelphia. Not only did African American men and women struggle to free themselves from the vestiges of slavery, but they also experienced a dynamic socioeconomic transition as the nineteenth century unfolded. As they moved from slavery

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to indentured servitude to wage labor, men and women of African descent found themselves confronted with a changing urban and rural landscape, and the black elite balanced the precarious nature of their freedom with a developing bourgeois culture.[2]

African American elite women saw themselves, their families, and their communities in a state of perpetual motion. As wives and mothers, black women juggled their domestic duties in their own households with work outside the home. Unlike white elite women in Philadelphia, African American women were forced to earn additional income in an effort to support their families, often finding jobs as teachers, nurses, and caterers.[3] For African Americans, middle-class status was often elusive and, if attained, always precarious. The weight of racism and disfranchisement as well as the concern for millions of blacks held in bondage compounded fears regarding the stability of their own financial and social status. As kidnappers scanned the small streets and alleys of Philadelphia's black community, members of the black middle class worried not only about their social positions but also about the security of their freedom.

The lives of African American women were filled not only with work in and outside the home, but with additional charity work, political activism, and religious devotion, all of which they believed would both benefit the black community of Philadelphia and transform the negative stereotypes of African American women. As these women constructed their personal and public spheres, respectability as well as sentimentalism became central in their nineteenth-century social circles. The world of friendship and sisterly love helped to strengthen political networks and extended kinship ties across the urban epicenters of the mid-Atlantic and New England regions.

Sentimentalism was a central component of nineteenth-century American culture, especially among the middle class. As the scholar Shirley Samuels suggests, sentimentalism became a "set of cultural practices designed to evoke a certain form of emotional response, usually empathy."[4] Sentimentalism worked across race, class, and gender boundaries, creating guidelines for the expression of feelings adopted by most female reformers, particularly those involved in the work of abolition. The plight of the black slave, the horrors of rape and sale on the auction block, as well as the corruption of the white family were central to the antislavery literature of the century, within which sentimentalism became an effective tool for reform. Scholars have given much attention to the work of sentimentalism in the nineteenth-century novel, as it was the genre most often used by male and female writers. The modern critique of the sentimental novel has shifted several times as scholars have moved from declaring the novel "a lesser

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

genre" to a feminist rejection of the absolute binary of separate spheres.[5] Sentimental literature was a method by which women achieved significant cultural gains. The sentimental novel introduced a popular feminine aesthetic that transformed traditional print culture and created a new space for women's writings, somewhere between the public and the private spheres.[6]

Although the culture of sentimentalism has been thoroughly examined with respect to published literature, there is still room for a critique of personal or private writings of nineteenth-century women, specifically the writings of African American women. The personal and semipublic arena of the friendship album allows us to examine the public and personal worlds of African American women who used the same methods of expression as did their white female counterparts. One of the most beautifully written and intriguing ways of creating community and friendship among women of the nineteenth century was the maintenance of friendship albums. As friendship albums were passed from friend to friend along the East Coast, the display of immaculate penmanship, proper grammar and spelling, and respectable prose regarding the private and the political allowed African Americans to reinforce their respectability within their own social circles. As the albums traveled from Baltimore to Philadelphia and as far north as Boston, educated African Americans established a protocol regarding discussions pertaining to womanhood, motherhood, and emancipation.

The friendship albums of African American women clearly echo the nineteenth-century sentimental albums of white women as well as novels, though the use of sentimentalism is far more complex than simple mimicry. As the scholar Claudia Tate suggests in her work on postreconstruction black female novelists, black women in their writings focused on sentimentality and respectability.[7] Elite African American women participated in the same discourse in antebellum Philadelphia as they wrote about their own lives and the possibilities for the future, providing a rare glimpse of their public and personal concerns. Tate writes that African American women used sentimental writing as an entry point to discuss the social and political issues of the era; she argues that idealized domesticity and sentimentalism represented "a fundamental cultural symbol of the Victorian era for representing civil ambition and prosperity."[8]

Despite the disappointments of the postreconstruction era, the genre of sentimentalism promoted the social advancement of African Americans, and for women of the antebellum North, the same held true. Moments of hope and possibility attached to gradual abolition of the 1780s were followed by decades of violence and hostility toward the free black community. Although the dreams of recently emancipated black men and women

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

were probably much more tenuous than those of their successors during the Reconstruction Era, the antebellum black elite wrote for the promise of the future, using sentimentalism in their friendship albums as a tool for reform. African American women shared their writings, both demonstrating learned social etiquette and simultaneously expressing the dream of complete freedom and equality.

On occasion, African American women shared their albums with white friends, asking them to enter their thoughts or good wishes. The writings contributed by white acquaintances to the albums were frequently political in nature, denouncing the evils of slavery and bolstering the burgeoning women's rights movement. The writings of white acquaintances lacked the intimacy and sensitivity demonstrated by African Americans who penned their thoughts in the albums. Whites failed to sympathize with the personal joys or tragedies of black men and women, nor did they comment on the personal life of the album's owner. Although their contributions were made with the best of intentions, the entries were clearly political.

Only four friendship albums belonging to nineteenth century African American women remain intact.[9] These albums serve as unique historical treasures, for they reveal the personal writings and feelings of the black elite, not only in Philadelphia but also throughout the urban North. Historians of antebellum African American women are often confronted with a scarcity of sources, as time and time again they are forced to reinterpret primary sources written and maintained by people who were not of African descent. Additional historical sources for African American women come from their public writings, usually in the form of newspaper articles and pamphlets, as well as minutes from local and national organizations. The recent discovery of these albums is of extreme importance: they have helped to define the intimate relationships and community-building practices among privileged African American men and women and have provided new insight into the private worlds of kinship and friendship.

The album stands as a midpoint between the public and private arena among the African American elite. As self-proclaimed representatives of their race, black men and women of Philadelphia were under the watchful eye of white residents. The words and actions of an African American individual would more than likely be seen as a representation of an entire community, so that the private sphere of the black elite was constrained. Album contributions provide an entry into the guarded, intimate lives of African American women. Within the pages of the friendship album, black women were provided an opportunity to write to and about one another; they brought sentimentality and very public debates such as abolition and

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

women's rights into a protected space. Not only did the album serve as a badge of respectability, but it also provided elite black women with an additional platform on which to reconstruct their image and expand their private relationships.

Words between Friends: Expressions of Female Friendship

In stark contrast to instruments such as public newspapers, the friendship album provided a more personal forum in which ideas and emotions could be exchanged. Nineteenth-century albums included poetry, short stories, personal letters, and watercolors, providing women with an unrestricted arena in which to express their admiration and affection to their friends.[10] Although these albums were the private possessions of their owners, the contents were not, simply by the way in which friendship albums were exchanged. The owner of the friendship album passed her keepsake to a friend, often allowing her to possess the album for days at a time.

Most nineteenth-century middle-class white women lived in a world defined by the domestic sphere, spending their time caring for the home, participating in religious activities, and visiting one another on a regular basis.[11] They helped one another with chores and the raising of families during times of illness, economic strife, and the deaths of loved ones. Female friends who resided in cities such as Philadelphia were able to visit one another with more frequency than those who lived in the hinterland, often traveling with one another in the absence of a husband or male relative. When women spent intimate and extended periods together without the daily constraints of family or housework, friendship became an escape from the confines of the domestic sphere.

Race and class redrew the confines of domesticity for middle-class black women, placing them in both the private and the public spheres. Bound to the traditional duties of wife, mother, and good Christian, they simultaneously participated in the very public work of antislavery and black mutual aid. Their work inside and outside the home influenced black female friendship and the worlds of love and sentimentality. Much of the extremely insightful scholarship regarding women's lives of the early nineteenth century focuses on the friendships between white women. The issues of slavery and racial discrimination did not find their way into the central discussion of those women's friendships, yet they were crucial to the lives of African American female friends.[12] As race and class constructed a multifaceted and

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

complex domestic sphere for African American women, the communication between black female friends reflected emotional support as well as a political agenda. The precarious position of middle-class black women during the early decades of the century did not always allow for a harmonious life, "free of emotional tension, enclosing within it secret sources of power and joy."[13] African American women of the middle class worked constantly at bolstering the black image and, more specifically, the reputations of African American women. Friendships between black women were extremely important for many of the same reasons they were important to antebellum white women, but African American women found in their friendships much more than an emotional crutch or an escape from the domestic sphere. Their friends became an extended kinship network, which would not only assist them in times of illness and despair, but also form a political alliance that would work to bring an end to the system of slavery. For African American women, friendship combined sentimentality with practicality.

The friendship album served as a symbol of sentimentality and popularity for African American women in Philadelphia and across the urban North. Most nineteenth-century sentimental literature was produced for and by white women, but scholars such as Jocelyn Moody have examined African American women and their connection to the genre. Moody argues that antebellum sentimentalism consisted of a basic set of core values used differently by women, both black and white. Early uses of sentimentalism appeared not only in the literary form of the novel, but in autobiographies as well.[14] Friendship albums used sentimentality as a vehicle to engage invited contributors while demonstrating common cultural assumptions about piety and virtue, at the same time deepening emotional and ethical ties between friends and colleagues.

As the content of the album was of sentimental importance to the owner, the reputation of those who penned their good wishes was also of great significance. Amy Matilda Cassey's friendship album, filled with beautiful calligraphy and genteel watercolors and bound in black morocco, provides historians with a window into album culture. Cassey was born in 1809 to a family of well-established African Americans in New York. The daughter of the Reverend Peter Williams, a leader in the black community, she married a member of Philadelphia's black elite in 1828. Joseph Cassey, a wealthy hairdresser and importer of perfumes, was a generation older than Amy and already entrenched in early antislavery activity and black improvement societies.[15] He aided in the creation of the first African

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal,* was a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and was a sales agent for William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator.*[16]

Following their marriage, Amy Cassey became involved in many reform movements and women's organizations. In 1833 she became a member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1836 she helped to launch the Moral Reform Association, a national African American temperance and uplift organization.[17] In addition to national movements, the Casseys were involved with local black improvement efforts such as the Gilbert Lyceum. Although Cassey's friendship album was a private journal, she understood that it would be read by all its contributors. Cassey wrote a preface to the album in which she invited her friends and colleagues to enjoy each other's contributions:

> Now reader as you find delight,
> In scanning o'er what others write,
> 'Tis hoped in gratitude alone,
> You'll add a tribute of your own.
> And thus with one choice piece at least
> enrich this mental pic-nic feast.[18]

Cassey's invitation made clear that although she selected the friends and acquaintances who were to write in her album, it was still a semipublic forum of expression among the black elite of Philadelphia.

Many of the entries recorded in nineteenth-century friendship albums represent the written expression of love between female friends. Appreciation of friends and positive depictions of acquaintances were scattered about the albums' pages and expressed in various styles. In many cases, the sentimental expression appeared in the form of a poem such as the one written in May 1833 by Sarah Louise Forten in Cassey's album. The original poem may very well have been shared in the public setting of the Gilbert Lyceum, of which they were both members. Although this specific poem was never printed in a newspaper of the time, it was representative of the type of poetry written between female friends and for the public:

> My prayer for thee dearest, is warm from the heart,
> Unmingled with flattery—unsullied by art,
> 'Tis the first fervent wishes I've traced on this page
> May they ever attend thee, in youth and in age.
> I pray that thy pathway on earth may be bright.[19]

As Sarah Forten expressed her good wishes to her friend Amy Cassey, she touched on several very common themes in the writings of nineteenth-century

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

women. In addition to wishing happiness to her friend, Forten extended the hope for a healthy and harmonious marriage for Cassey. She wished them well through the good and difficult times, but she specifically wished that Cassey's husband would have the ability to endure the trials of marriage and that "from the love he then pledged may he never depart."[20]

The importance of marriage among nineteenth-century women, in particular black women, recurred as a central theme throughout many friendship albums of the era. As the institution of slavery had prohibited or at the very least limited the option of marriage, free African American women of the antebellum era took very seriously the ability and the perceived need to be married. Victorian respectability hinged on the formation of a nuclear family and the importance of marriage. As Forten's entry wished Cassey and her husband well, it also served as a reminder of the significance as well as the respectability attached to the institution of marriage.

As the African American elite wrote to one another and for one another in the friendship album, their displays of sentimentality differed according to the individual writer. Mary Forten showed her feelings of admiration and love for Amy Cassey through the contribution of a poem entitled "Friendship."

> Friendship! to thee unsullied joys belong;
> Joys that bless e'en Heaven's immortal throng.
> In those bright realms so rich in every joy;
> That hope herself would but the bliss annoy.[21]

Themes of motherhood and womanhood were constants in the poetry written in the album, though issues such as religion and piety were also included.

An invitation to write in a friendship album was not only an honor but also a way to be identified as a member of, or connected to, the African American elite. To enter one's prose and poetry in an album was a privilege respected by many, but at times it appears to have been difficult for women and men to find the appropriate words for a friend. Such was the case with Susan Wright, who was asked by Amy Cassey in November 1833 to contribute to her album. Wright titled her entry "My Friend" and wrote a five-line poem.

> My Friend,
> You ask me on this page to write
> A *copy* of my heart for you,
> But thoughts and words have fled tonight,
> Be sure the original is true.[22]

Friends took home each other's albums and found on occasion that words did not come with ease. It appears, however, as though it was better to be

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

honest about the inability to write with ease than to risk offending a good friend or important acquaintance.

Expressions of Love: African American Men's and Women's Writings

The friendship album was shared not only with female friends; male friends and acquaintances were also asked to add their writings and thoughts to the album. Although the overwhelming majority of writers appear to have been women, male members of the African American elite did contribute their sentiments, and the difference in their writing style, as well as in their sentimentality, sets them apart from their female counterparts. Although men's contributions were sentimental, they often lacked the degree of intimacy that appeared in the poetry and prose written by African American women. Often men simply copied short stories and poems written by others instead of contributing original pieces, and many of the entries had very little if anything to do with friendship; instead, they revolved around political issues of the moment. In the friendship album of Mary Virginia Wood Forten, James Forten Jr., her brother-in-law, entered a poem entitled "On Time":

> All powerful Time! thy potency we own,
> Countless the trophies that adorn thy throne
> At thy rebuke the elements decay,
> Man's boasted hope, before thee melts away
> His proud memorials too soon are thine
> His pomp and glory but adorn thy shrine
> Yet mighty king! though ancient is thy reign,
> In terrors clad thy potency is vain;
> Thou too shalt fail when on thy yielding shore
> The final trump proclaims that time shall be no more![23]

Forten's entry to his own relative was fairly devoid of emotion as well as sentimentality. He failed to mention any of the noble attributes or personal characteristics of his own family member, nor did he wish her health, happiness, or success, as did the many women writers. His entry did share several philosophical commonalities with the entries penned by women, however, the most obvious being a reference to the power and potency of time. As the friendship album was a way by which to "cheat old father time," Forten was able to immortalize his thoughts within its pages.

Other well-known African American men contributed to the culture of album writing. Patrick Henry Reason, a commercial engraver from New York,

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

inscribed Washington Irving's poem "The Wife" in Amy Cassey's album, and James McCune Smith and John Chew contributed several writings as well.[24] Chew's entry, "To the Lost One," was written following the death of Joseph Cassey in 1848. The twenty-year marriage between Amy and Joseph Cassey had ended, and Amy Cassey's close friends dedicated several sonnets to her husband's memory.

In a number of cases, men who chose to write in the albums explained their lack of sentimentality. In January 1850 Frederick Douglass contributed to Cassey's album. Unlike Forten, Douglass explained his awkwardness and inability to write in a sentimental fashion: "I never feel more entirely out of my sphere, than when presuming to write in an Album. This suggestion of beauty elegance and refinement—whilst my habit of life passed history—& present occupation—have called into exercise all the sterner qualities of my head and heart."[25] Douglass's explanation for his inability to write with sentimentality rested on his experience as an enslaved man and his abolitionist activity. The brutality he had experienced as an enslaved person, as well as his challenging and often dangerous life as an agent of antislavery activity, proved for him incompatible with expressing sentimentality. Douglass completed his entry by asking forgiveness "for not writing something becoming the pages of your precious album."[26]

Accompanying Douglass on his visit to Philadelphia was Charles Lenox Redmond of Salem, Massachusetts. As a wealthy black businessman, he was the first African American lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and popular in many circles among the black elite. In 1850 Amy Cassey married the articulate antislavery lecturer, becoming Mrs. Charles Lenox Redmond and relocating to Salem.[27]

Reflections on Womanhood and Motherhood

Not only were the friendship albums of the nineteenth century used to express feelings between friends, but they also served as emblems of etiquette among the African American elite. Friends and family shared poems and short stories with one another that contained moral messages and reminders about respectability and the appropriate role of wife and mother. Discussion regarding the proper dependency and submissiveness of women was often found in the writings of the black elite. As these women generally worked outside the home to help support their families or as philanthropists, they found it necessary to remind each other of the appropriateness of strength and dependency. Across the country women such as Sarah Mapps Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper served

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

as schoolteachers for black children. Mary Ann Shadd Cary became editor of the *Provincial Freeman,* and both Margaretta and Sarah Forten were regular contributors to the *Liberator* and the *North Star.*[28] Although elite status and the desire for respectability reinforced the label of the "weaker sex" among the black elite, the actions of these women worked to dismantle the stereotype.

An unsigned poem in the Cassey album entitled "The Fair Sex" described in a somewhat humorous manner the weakness of women:

> When Eve brought woe to all Mankind,
> Old Adam called her wo-man;
> But when she woo'd with love so kind,
> He then pronounced her woo-man.
> But now with folly and with pride,
> Their husbands keenly trimming,
> The ladies are so full of whims,
> That people call them whim-men.[29]

The gender of the poem's author is unknown, but its central conviction is quite clear. The stereotype of the whimsical and evil woman was not an inappropriate or uncommon subject for the friendship album. The religious condemnation of Eve and her centrality to earthly problems reinforced the degraded position of women in nineteenth-century thought. As African American men and women found their nucleus for community formation within the church, the immorality of woman, generated from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, placed them in a submissive position. Women's inability to think reasonably or act appropriately designated their position in life, and in many ways antebellum black women understood and reinforced their own social subjugation.

Although many black women found themselves in positions of shared authority in their own households, they nevertheless often subscribed to many of the same beliefs and customs of wealthier white women of the antebellum era. The majority of African American women were forced to work outside the home for economic survival, but they promoted the idea of the centrality of the home as well as the duties of a good wife.[30] As a civil institution, religious vow, and intimate personal relationship, marriage is an important social construction to examine, specifically among African Americans of the early nineteenth century. Still forbidden to most African Americans of the South, marriage became a symbol of freedom and possibility for free blacks throughout the North. Marriage, family, and home ownership during the era of slavery were understood as privileged, precious, and precarious for most African Americans in the northern antebellum city. The understood duties of

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the "good wife" were not simply imitated by black women; they were practiced with the hopes and expectation of eventual social equality. The writings of Mary Forten to Amy Cassey express the duties of a good wife through poetry. Her poem "Good Wives" made clear the duties and expectations of a married woman:

> Good wives to snails should be akin—
> Always their houses keep within
> But not to carry Fashion's hacks,
> All they are worth upon their back
> Good wives like city clocks should chime
> Be regular and keep in time
> But not like the city clocks aloud
> Be heard by all the vulgar crowd
> Good Wives like echoes still should do
> Speak but when they are spoken to;
> But not like echoes most absurd
> Have forever the last word.[31]

Forten's words not only indicate the importance of wifely duties within the household, but also reinforce the subjugated role of a wife. Forten's poem advised women to follow the example of the snail and "always their houses keep within," reiterating the centrality of the home in the lives of African American women. It is also quite possible that this line referred to confining personal business to the home. Not only were good wives to keep themselves in the household, but they also were to follow the lead of their spouses, "echoing" their husbands' words, speaking only "when they are spoken to."[32] "Good Wives" served as a reminder of the importance of respectability to the black female elite. Women such as Forten and Cassey worked hard to reshape the image of blacks in Philadelphia and elsewhere from the verbose, aggressive, and independent African American woman to the modest and respectable Victorian lady. Victorian ladyship, as can be seen through public and private writings of the period, was more than an imitation of white society. African American women celebrated and critiqued the institution of marriage, using the trope of the "marriage convention" to explore "race, racism, and racial identity" and "complex questions of sexuality and female subjectivity."[33]

In addition to her poem on the role of the good wife, Forten addressed issues of freedom and representation. The antebellum years marked a period of heightened racial hostility in Philadelphia, and as African Americans in that city began to experience and assert their freedom, one way in which they demonstrated their new status was through their appearance.[34]

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The acquisition of new clothing and the adoption of European speech patterns and mannerisms were often viewed as offensive by many whites. The majority of white America simply ridiculed black men and women for their expressions of freedom.[35] Their ridicule was sometimes expressed in the popular nineteenth-century art form of the politically satirical cartoon. Derogatory images were frequently reproduced in newspapers and prints, mocking the supposedly lavish style of dress exhibited by newly free men and women.[36] Most often targeting the poorest of free African Americans, these disparaging portraits showed apelike women dressed in gaudy clothing with abundant accessories such as jewelry, hats, and gloves.

The first racist caricatures appeared in Philadelphia in 1819 and became extremely popular by the middle decades of the nineteenth century.[37] William Thackera, a well-known artist and engraver for the city of Philadelphia, created the first series of prints mocking the dress, speech, and appearance of black Philadelphians. Edward W. Clay, a Philadelphia sketch artist of some repute, became one of the first artists to exploit the image of the overdressed and newly freed black Philadelphian.[38] His infamous sketches entitled "Life in Philadelphia," and his disparaging comedic references to African American men and women in pamphlets sold across the country and eventually overseas, became popular icons of the era.[39]

Although Clay's caricatures targeted both black men and women, his depiction of the emerging black middle-class female was particularly hostile. Much more vicious than the cartoons drawn by Thackera, his images repeatedly portrayed black women as ridiculous creatures, overdressed and inappropriate. In one particular image from the series, Clay depicted an African American man and woman dressed in overly ornate clothing. The female protagonist has donned a large hoopskirt, fancy lace gloves, garish jewelry, and a headpiece. As in all of his sketches, the black woman is heavyset, dwarfing her male counterpart. Her thick neck, buckteeth, large hands and feet, and short-cropped hair reinforce the animal-like image of African American women commonly reproduced at the time.[40]

It wasn't only physical appearance that was ridiculed in these cartoons, but speech patterns as well, specifically black vernacular. In Clay's sketch entitled "Miss Minta," a gentleman of African descent inquires of his female friend, "Shall I hab de honour to dance de next quadrille wid you?" Miss Minta replies, "Tank you, Mr. Cato,—wid much pleasure, only I'm engaged for de nine next set!"[41] The hostile depiction of black women not only scorned black dialect and a supposed lack of education, but also reinforced the image of the hypersexual black female. Miss Minta's eager response to the dance request of her male suitor, along with her acceptance

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of nine other dance partners, fortified the racist imagery of the sexually impure black woman.

Clay produced many more sketches in his series, all of which poked fun at newly freed African Americans. In addition to using an apelike image of the African American woman, he paid much attention to her supposed inability to dress appropriately. White Philadelphians commented on the attention blacks gave to expensive clothing, and Clay's sketches reflected their hostile ridicule. In another sketch, also titled "Miss Minta," Clay poked fun at a black woman shopping for a new bonnet. As the large woman peers into a mirror, her entire face is hidden by a ludicrously oversized hat. Her large feet and hands defeminize her appearance as she asks her male friend his opinion of her new chapeau: "What you tink of my new poke bonnet Frederick Augustus?" Augustus replies, "I dont like him no how, 'case dey hide you lubly face, so you can't tell one she nigger from anoder."[42]

Faced with what appeared to be a campaign to disparage the image of African American men and women, middle-class women of African descent not only contested these images through public writings, but also reminded one another of the importance of appearance. Mary Forten's entry in Cassey's album spoke directly to the issue of the representation of freedom. For the African American elite, an understated and modest manner of living was emblematic of respectability, and it would simultaneously attempt to dismantle the disparaging images of free men and women.

Poetry and short stories designed to temper the fashions of African American women often blended notions of Christianity and piety with social commentary, and the Dickerson albums represent much of this. The Dickerson family lived on Locust Street in Philadelphia and was involved in many of the same activities as Amy Cassey and her husband. Martin Dickerson, patriarch of the family, released himself from bondage and worked as a male nurse. His wife, Adelia, ran a tavern in the Walnut Street Theatre and outlived her husband by nearly forty years, dying in 1877.[43] The couple was representative of the nineteenth-century black middle class, having two wage-earning adults in the household. The Dickersons raised five children, two sons, Charles and William, and three daughters, Amelia, Martina, and Mary Anne.

Both Martina and Mary Anne maintained friendship albums similar in appearance to Amy Cassey's album. Mary Anne Dickerson's album recorded her birth around 1822; she was eleven years old at the time she began collecting the prose and poetry of her friends. She married John Jones of Baltimore in 1846, enhancing an already long-standing network between the black elite

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Shall I hab de honour to dance . . ." From Edward Clay, "Life in Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1829). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"What you tink of my new poke bonnet . . ." From Edward Clay, "Life in Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1830). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Have you any *flesh* coloured silk stockings . . ." From Edward Clay, "Life in Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, ca. 1830). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

of the two cities. Her sister Martina Dickerson began her album in 1840.[44] Both Mary Anne and Martina Dickerson attended Sarah M. Douglass's school, like others of the black middle class.

In July 1840 Rebecca F. Peterson of New York wrote to her friend Martina Dickerson a simple poem entitled "A Lady's Dress":

> Let your earings be Assension encircled
> by the pearls of Refinement: the diamond
> of your necklace be Truth and the chain
> Christianity, your breast pin be Modesty set
> With Compassion, your bracelets be Chairity orna-

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> mented with the tassals of Good Humour. Your
> finger rings be Assension set round with the
> pearls of Gentleness, let your shoes be Wisdom
> secured by the buckles of Perserverance.[45]

Peterson's poem, although centered on the topic of fashion and appropriate apparel, more clearly focused on the morality and refinement of "A Lady." Peterson's poem gently emphasized Christianity and compassion and, unlike Mary Forten's "Good Wife," did not promote submissiveness. For Peterson, refinement, truth, Christianity, modesty, compassion, charity, good humor, gentleness, and perseverance were prescriptions for ladyship, a category not easily attained by African American women, even those of the middle class.

As the bonds of friendship crossed state lines, friendship albums traveled from friend to friend across the entire Northeast. African American women in Philadelphia were concerned about the image of respectability, as were their female friends in Baltimore and New York. Martina Dickerson asked her friend Rebecca Peterson to make a contribution to her friendship album. Peterson's entry reflects the heightened desire for respectability, though Peterson's writing was directed to her literate friends and acquaintances. Her poem "On a Lady's Writing" contributed to the rules of decorum for these women, besides reinforcing the concept of "woman's place":

> Her even lines her even temper show
> Neat as her dress, and polished as her brow;
> Strong as her judgement, easy as her air
> Correct though free, and regular though fair.
> And the same graces o'er her preside,
> That form her manners and her footsteps guide.[46]

Peterson's words, such as "even lines," connected respectability to literacy and penmanship, which for many early nineteenth-century African American men and women were still highly inaccessible. For African Americans living under a social microscope, even one individual's successful writing served as a badge of respectability. Proper penmanship and correct spelling were acquired from formal instruction and equated with appropriate manners. Supposedly, "On a Lady's Writing" served as an example of general decorum. For women such as Martina Dickerson, however, who most likely benefited from the best education available to her at the time, the poem served as a reminder of her responsibility as an educated African American woman. Not only were Dickerson and her female friends and companions

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

who shared the book obligated to continue the pursuit of education and literacy, they were to do so with an even temper. The polished graces and social etiquette assumed by elite African American women were to be practiced and adhered to in all forums, from the privacy of their own homes to the words of their personal writings.

The rearing of children and the importance of motherhood were also explored through poetry and prose. In 1834 Mary Anne Dickerson Jones asked her friends to submit entries to her album, but she herself chronicled the major happenings in her life in its pages. The first entry in the album was a print of a small child entitled "The Mother's Joy." The poem that followed the print was an original work written most likely by Charlotte Forten.[47]

> Thine is a happy lot sweet boy
> Oh! that mine were the same,
> Like thee, to my mother's joy
> Like thee to lisp her name[48]

There were many references to motherhood throughout Mary Anne Dickerson's album, some written by her friends and others by her own pen. It appears as though her album was not only a place in which to collect the writings and the admiration of her friends, but also a way in which to help her deal with the death of her own son. In January 1851 one-year-old William Dickerson Jones, the son of Mary Anne Dickerson Jones and John Jones of Baltimore, died, leaving behind distressed parents. As Dickerson Jones had entered all the marriages, births, and deaths of her immediate family in her album, she included the death of her own son, affectionately called Willie. Shortly after his death, Dickerson Jones wrote about the pain of losing a child.

> To my dear Willie
> Slumber sweet infant
> Thy spirit is free,
> The portals of Heaven
> Are open to thee
> The hopes of fond parents
> Lie burried in gloom,
> For the pride of their hearts
> Is cold in the tomb.[49]

Although many contributions to the friendship albums of the nineteenth century discussed motherhood, Mary Anne Dickerson Jones's album had many more entries concerning children, parental relationships, and death than did the albums of her friends. It is quite probable that her friends

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

understood the loss of her infant son as a traumatic experience in her life, and they therefore wrote to encourage and uplift the spirit of the bereaved mother. John Jones, her husband, wrote an entry in which he attempted to describe the pain and anguish felt by family members in mourning the death of a loved one. His poem "The Night of Death" captured the depression and sorrow brought about by such loss.

The Night of Death
There's beauty in the hues that paint
The sunset skies;
The beauty fades, and soon grows faint
The brilliant dyes
Night from her dim and dusky skies
Her gloom doth shed
And darkness seems o'er all the zone
A mantle spread
So when the lights of life may fade,
And all that's bright;
We shall repose amid the shade
Of death's dark night.[50]

Husbands and wives occasionally used the friendship album to express love and gratitude to one another, but their writings most often appeared after the death of a spouse. D. Alexander Payne of Baltimore expressed his grief over the loss of his wife and daughter in the friendship album of Amy Cassey. His first poem, "Lines Occasioned by the Death of my Sainted Wife Julia Ann Payne," not only revealed a deep longing for his partner, but also reinforced the image and reputation of his wife. Through his eulogizing poem, Payne wrote of his wife's strong faith and the good deeds she accomplished throughout her lifetime. She left her existence with her worldly family as a pious Christian, mother, and wife to be embraced by the arms of God in heaven:

Thou art gone! to the land of the blest,
Thou art gone! to the home of the pure,
Thou art gone! to thy heavenly rest,
Thy Saviour and God to adore.
Thou art gone! from the region of death,
Whose sorrow and suffering use rife;
To the clime, whose ethereal breath,
From my arms—to the bosom of God![51]

Payne's poem about his wife expressed to the Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and Boston African American elite his sincere admiration of his wife.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The mention of her works while on earth implied that not only was she a loved wife and mother, but also that she provided for and nurtured the entire community. According to Payne's poem, the work of motherhood brought about her early departure; Julia Payne's death occurred during childbirth, proving how dangerous motherhood could be:

> Like the silk-worm that weaves its own shroud,
> And dies to give birth to its fly
> So didst thou! Then upon a bright cloud
> Thou art gone to the mansions on high![52]

Payne also discussed in Cassey's album the death of his daughter, which occurred some two years following the death of his wife. Payne described this death as "another painful blow"; he acknowledged, however, that his daughter, as a child of God, did not belong solely to him but to the Lord:

> There she blooms in a brighter clime,
> Where all is pure, and sweet, and green,
> Where fell disease, and storms of time,
> Are neither felt, nor heard, nor seen.
> I'll mourn not for thee my sweet one
> Thou wast loan'd never given,
> *bright gem, from the land of the Sun!*
> *Go shine midst the jewels of heav'n!*[53]

Payne acknowledged his daughter's transition into heaven through the title of his poem, "To My Daughter in Heaven." In its text Payne depicted his pure and sweet infant daughter as going "away to the home in the sky! away to the bosom of God!"

Payne wrote of his double loss shortly after the death of his child. His entry in Cassey's friendship album made no reference to its owner or her relationship with the Payne family. The album was simply used as a forum in which to express the grief following the death of a loved one and a vehicle by which to praise members of the black elite. Thus, the friendship album was a place in which both elite women and men expressed their feelings about family, grief, and love.

Not only was the friendship album a space in which African American men and women could engage in personal writings about private matters, but it also served as a forum in which to discuss and publicly debate the politics of the mid-nineteenth century. Topics such as slavery, moral reform, and the removal of Native Americans from their homeland found their way into the pages of the friendship album. Political commentary from men and women both world renowned and obscure demonstrated

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

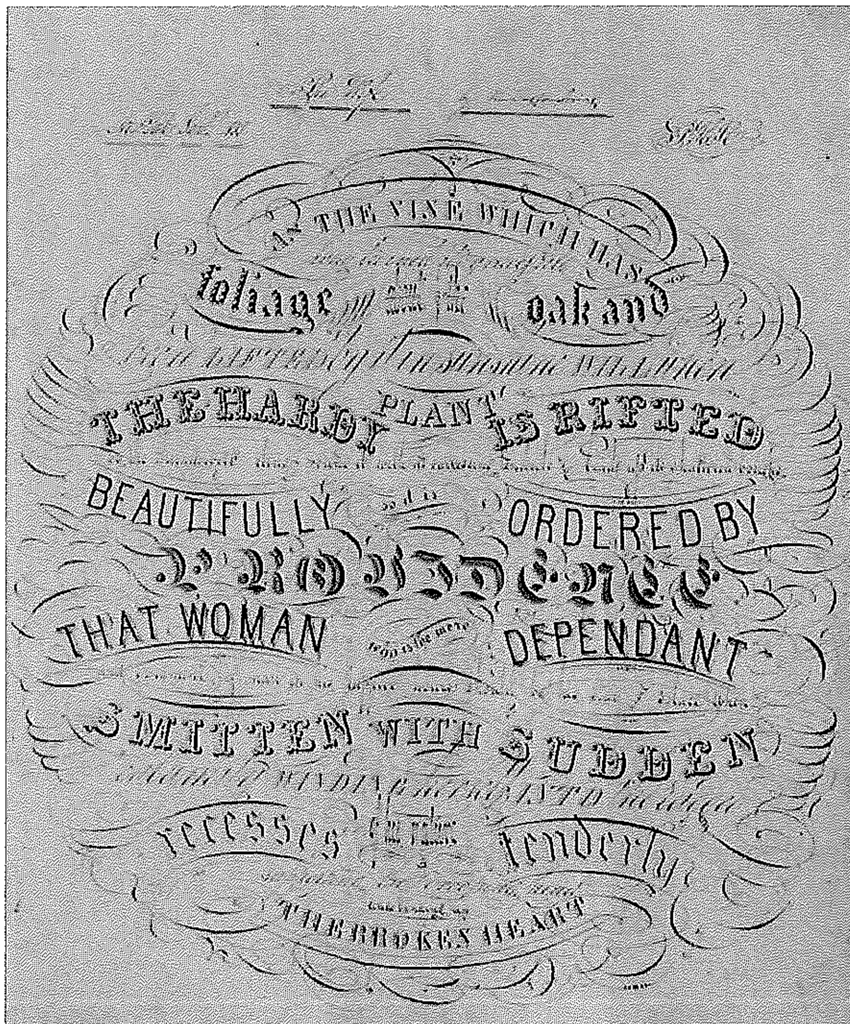
Sarah Mapps Douglass, "A token of my love from me, to thee": butterfly watercolor. From the Amy Matilda Cassey Friendship Album, 1839. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Margaretta Forten, poem and watercolor of a vase of flowers. From the Amy Matilda Cassey Friendship Album. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

the vast political and social networks established by both the African American and white elite of Philadelphia. In the Cassey album the writings of women such as Anna Warren Weston articulated the central political debate of the century. Weston's abolitionist writings, of which this untitled poem is but one example, made clear her opinion of the injustice associated with slavery:

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

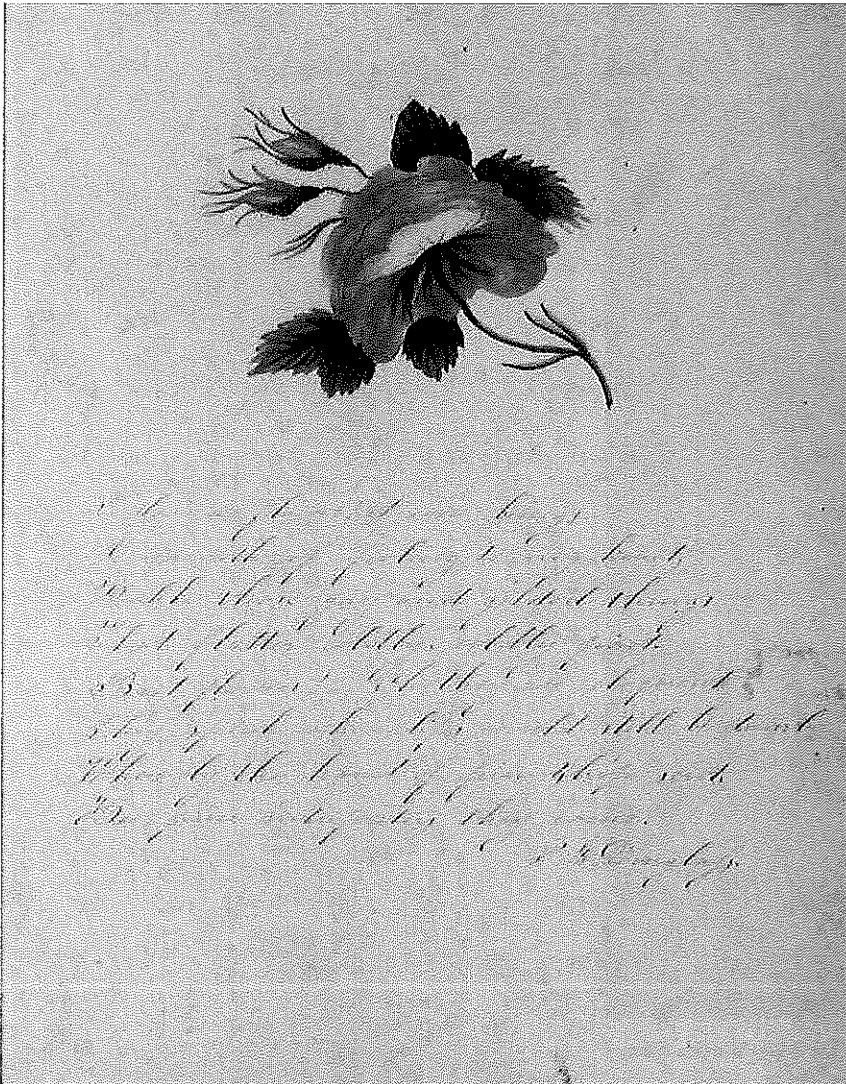


Patrick Henry Reason, "The Wife, by Washington Irving." From the Amy Matilda Cassey Friendship Album, 1839. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

> Three million men of God release free
> In this America of ours are slaves
> Lives dark with suffering, unremembered graves,—[54]

Weston's entry demonstrated her abolitionist sentiment, but it also gave her a semipublic forum in which she criticized the policies and social customs of the country. In her poem Weston chastised America as a strong and

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



Sarah Mapps Douglass, poem and watercolor of a rose. From the Amy Matilda Cassey Friendship Album. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

powerful nation that enslaved the "weak & poor." Weston also charged America with a hypocritical expression of Christianity through its institution of slavery:

> The bitterer shame and anguish is that we
> The eighteen millions strong, & rich, & great,

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> Proud of the memories those from Plymouth date;
> In Christ's own Gospel swift are parts to claim,
> Are yet the enslavers of the weak & poor,
> Or worse the jailers at the prison door.
> *This* is the cause for anguish, *this* the shame![55]

Weston's contribution most likely represented the feelings of many if not all of Cassey's friends and acquaintances who contributed to the pages of the album. It was William Lloyd Garrison who wrote perhaps one of the longest entries in Cassey's friendship album. "The Abolition Cause" elaborated on many of the ideas expressed by Weston. But unlike Weston, Garrison focused in the first section of his writing much more on the plight of the abolitionist than on that of the enslaved:

> They knew that slander would blacken their characters with infamy; that their rebukes and entreaties would be received with ridicule, anger and reproach; that persecution would assail them on the right hand and on the left; that the dungeon would yawn for their bodies; that the dagger of the assasin would gleam behind them; that the arm of power would be raised to crush them to the earth; that they would be branded as disturbers of the peace, as fanatics, madmen and incendiaries; that the heal of friendship would be lifted against them, and love be turned into hatred, and confidence into suspicion, and respect into division; that their worldly interests would be jeoparded and the honors and envolvements of office be withheld from their enjoyment. Knowing all this, still they dared all things, in order to save their country, and abolish the bloody system of slavery.[56]

Garrison's words targeted those most likely to read and write in the Cassey album: African American abolitionists. His friendship with many of the African American elite in Philadelphia allowed him entry into the semiprivate and public world of black Philadelphians through the friendship album. Although his writing supported abolition, his entry was aimed at the African American elite as a group of political and social activists, and through it he strengthened his ties to friends and colleagues in abolitionist circles.

Abolitionism was not the only political commentary to present itself in the friendship album. The subject of women's rights appeared in Mary Anne Dickerson Jones's album. William C. Nell of New York copied a well-known poem as his entry, "The Rights of Woman." As the 1840s provided a developing public forum in which women and men could discuss the social and political inclusion of women, the friendship album reflected the attitudes of African Americans on the subject. Nell did not write about the need to grant suffrage or political rights to women, but instead he encouraged a traditionally paternalistic

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

viewpoint. While Nell acknowledged that the rights of women "merit some attention," he went on to state that an "earned right of Woman is—protection" a clear suggestion that women should maintain their dependency on fathers, husbands, brothers and the like.[57]

As elite African American women created a space for themselves to begin political dialogue concerning issues such as slavery and women's rights, they still sought to embody an elite understanding of womanhood and motherhood. The semiprivate sphere of the friendship album allowed black men and women to share ideas, concerns, and political ideology with one another, extending the social and political networks of black Philadelphia throughout the northern states. Unlike the friendship albums maintained by white women, blacks' sentimental albums and diaries maintained African American friendships over long distances and time. Catherine Kelly's work on rural women in New England demonstrates that white women wrote in sentimental albums for very different reasons. Although many albums focused on the importance and fragility of friendship, as well as documentation of sentimental memory, the white woman's friendship album served simply as a way by which to curate memory, not as a method by which to maintain networks. There were certainly thematic similarities between the albums of white and black women, particularly with regard to gentility and offers of warm wishes. Adaliza Cutter Phelps of New Hampshire contributed to her cousin's album words that were very similar to those found in Amy Cassey's album:

> on this page, so purely white
> I'll trill a simple, heartfelt lay,
> With other friends my name I'll write,
> And bind in Friendship's sweet boquet.[58]

Friendship was elusive to many white antebellum women who studied at the female academies of New England, for although they cultivated strong relationships with women from different geographical regions, they found themselves unable to maintain their friendships over extended periods. Hard work and the care of family replaced the importance of friendship, and Kelly notes that "in the countryside, the culture of friendship rarely survived the transition from girlhood to adulthood."[59]

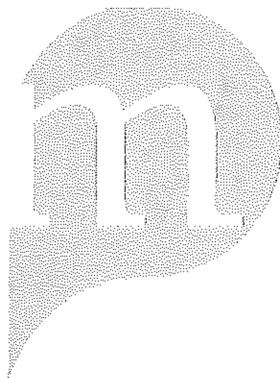
This was not the case for African American women of the same time period, however. Friendship albums served as a vehicle to draw communities of elite black women together throughout the Northeast. Although African American women were separated by geographical space, they expected to see one another at social gatherings and political functions. Albums maintained

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

by these women represent a network of friends and acquaintances that would be nurtured, not dismantled. Although Amy Cassey lived in Philadelphia, she had spent a great deal of her childhood in New York; she often provided friends in Philadelphia with contacts and connections in her hometown. When a group of young African American women traveled to New York to attend a women's antislavery convention in 1837, Cassey made arrangements for the group to board with her parents.[60]

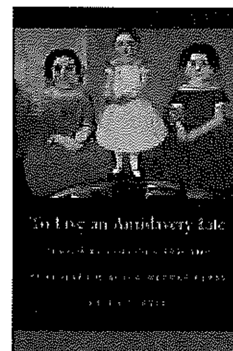
The sentimentalism of friendship was but one aspect of the relationships between women of the black elite. Friends constantly visited and often wrote letters of introduction for one another, at times easing what could be a difficult journey into a racially hostile environment. Friendship was not a luxury; it was for many a necessity. For African American women, friendship albums assisted in the maintenance of long-distance relationships; they expected that friendship would survive across time and space. The albums simultaneously reinforced nineteenth-century notions of womanhood, motherhood, and reform. They stood as symbols of work that was yet to be completed in the African American communities of the North as well as the promise of emancipation and citizenship not yet achieved.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:10 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



To Live an Antislavery Life

Erica L. Ball



Published by University of Georgia Press

Ball, L..
To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class.
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
Project MUSE., https://muse.jhu.edu/.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/19536

Access provided by Drexel University (10 Dec 2018 18:26 GMT)

CHAPTER THREE

Antislavery Discourse and the African American Family

> And unfortunately for me, I am the father of a slave, a word too obnoxious to be spoken by a fugitive slave. It calls fresh to my mind the separation of husband and wife; of stripping, tying up and flogging; of tearing children from their parents, and selling them on the auction block. It calls to mind female virtue trampled under foot with impunity. But oh! when I remember that my daughter, my only child, is still there, destined to share the fate of all these calamities, it is too much to bear. If ever there was any one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over it is that of being a father and a husband of slaves. I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am only the father of one slave. She is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh; poor unfortunate child. She was the first and shall be the last slave that ever I will father, for chains and slavery on this earth.
>
> —Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849)

When Harriet Jacobs began writing her memoir, she must have known that her story would be difficult to believe. After all, she had spent seven years of her life hiding from her master in a crawl space in her free grandmother's attic before finally escaping from Edenton, North Carolina, and securing her freedom in New York. Still, as she put it in a letter to white abolitionist Amy Post, "I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself."[1] Publishing under the pseudonym Linda Brent and using false names for all the people whose experiences she detailed in print, Jacobs hoped to protect the safety and reputation of her friends and family and to avoid "attract[ing] attention" to herself or "excit[ing] sympathy" for her "own sufferings." Rather, she hoped that her female perspective on the peculiar institution would help "to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is."[2]

As scholars have noted, the narrative Jacobs ultimately published in 1861,

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, was not an authoritative account of a man's quest for liberty and triumph of will but instead constituted a domestic tale about family, community, and feminine virtue struggling to survive under the oppressive weight of slavery. Jacobs told her readers of her aged grandmother's deep love for her children and grandchildren and of her father's care and concern for his family. She also detailed her experiences as a fifteen-year-old girl living in the household of a lecherous middle-aged master and jealous mistress, describing her devastation when her owner, determined to make her his concubine, refused to allow her to marry the free black carpenter she loved. Certain that she would be unable to continue eluding her master's sexual advances and aware that he would surely sell any children she might bear, Jacobs entered instead into a sexual relationship with a young unmarried white attorney from a family more prominent than that of her owner. Hopeful that her lover would purchase and emancipate any children he might father, Jacobs defined this decision as a necessary self-protective measure, the first in a series of sacrifices she would make on behalf of the son and daughter she would later bear. Her love for these children ultimately kept her hiding close to them in Edenton and determined to make a home for them in the free North.

Jacobs's tale serves as the quintessential reminder that slave narratives did not limit themselves to the struggle of men throwing off their chains. Throughout the antebellum era, concerns about slavery's impact on African American domestic relationships remained a central theme in black antislavery discourse.[3] While these stories were designed to counter proslavery propaganda and increase abolitionist sentiment by revealing the true nature of the chattel principle, they also performed an additional function for African American readers. Rather than enlightening northern free blacks about the evils of slavery, antislavery discourse in general and slave narratives in particular reminded free black readers of slavery's impact on their literal and figurative families, past, present, and future. In this way, slave narratives offered a distinctly personal lens through which northern free blacks could review the horrors of slavery, crystallizing the imperative of living an antislavery life and strengthening their sense of solidarity with their enslaved brothers and sisters in distant lands.

"THE MORE TENDER RELATIONS"

White and black abolitionists alike insisted that slavery had a particularly dreadful impact on the gender dynamics and family life of the enslaved. In this view, "the slave family was the immediate victim" of the peculiar institution.[4]

Wives and husbands were separated, children were torn from their parents, and young women were sold into prostitution. To emphasize this point, the masthead of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* newspaper regularly featured images of enslaved families on the auction block, waiting to be sold alongside horses and cattle. Antislavery poetry and prose, meanwhile, highlighted descriptions of families shattered simply to satisfy the greed of their masters, making them symbols of slavery's unfathomable and deeply personal cruelty.

Northern black activists agreed that slaveholders were, as Martin Delany wrote, "robbers of the dearest social ties, and ruthless despoilers of the most sacred family connection!"[5] And visual and narrative descriptions of these violations held great emotional power, as is evidenced by the reception of one of the most famous speeches of the day, the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet's "Address to the Slaves." First given in 1843 at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, this address has long been considered an important harbinger of the growing militancy of free black activists.[6] Addressing his "Brethren and Fellow Citizens," Garnet denounced slavery as "sinful" and called for the enslaved to "use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical," to put it to an end. He urged enslaved African Americans to stop working for their masters, to "cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse." Saying, "there is not much hope of Redemption without the shedding of blood," Garnet demanded they take up the motto "Resistance! Resistance! Resistance!" and make it clear to slaveholders that it was "no longer" a "debatable question, whether it is better to choose LIBERTY or DEATH!"[7] While the militancy in Garnet's speech is undeniable, an examination of how the speech was recorded in the published minutes of the 1843 convention proceedings is instructive.[8] Although the speech apparently took "nearly one hour and a half," when the recording secretary summarized Garnet's words and their reception, only two sentences were devoted to the speech's contents, focusing on Garnet's critique of slavery's impact on African American families: Garnet "reviewed the abominable system of slavery, showed its mighty workings, its deeds of darkness and of death—how it robbed parents of children, and children of parents, husbands of wives; how it prostituted the daughters of the slaves; how it murdered the colored man." These stories apparently had a powerful effect on the convention delegates and spectators, for after hearing Garnet recount these abuses, the entire convention was "literally infused with tears."[9]

Those African Americans who wrote slave narratives provided personal testimony that corroborated Garnet's descriptions of slavery's corrosive power.

Authors wrote evocatively of the misery experienced by enslaved children. Abolitionist literature consistently portrayed enslaved children as the "victims of emotional and psychic pain, ranging from separation from their families, to the denial of education and religious instruction."[10] In their narratives, Frederick Douglass and James W. C. Pennington pointed out that as enslaved children, they suffered from neglect. Douglass recalled that because his mother was hired out to a planter who lived twelve miles away, she was unable to care for him or even visit with any regularity: the "four or five times" that he did see his mother, the visits were "very short in duration, and at night."[11] And Pennington wrote that when he was around age four, he "began to feel another evil of slavery—I mean the want of parental care and attention to the children during the day." Pennington remembered enduring hunger and loneliness and being left to fend for himself while his parents labored. "To estimate the sad state of a slave child," he wrote, "you must look at it as a hopeless human being thrown into the world without a social circle to flee to for hope, shelter, comfort, or instruction."[12]

These descriptions provided a startling contrast with the sentimental version of childhood so important to the emerging middle classes in the period. By the 1830s, as household manufacturing declined and birthrates decreased, childhood began to take on a divine status in middle-class families. "Ministers, physicians, educators and other moralists from the Northeast" created a romantic image of innocent children, idealizing childhood as a precious and sentimental time meant to be free from care. Middle-class parents were expected to attend very closely to their children's spiritual, intellectual, and material needs and to discipline them gently with "maternal tenderness, patience and love."[13] As the narratives of Pennington and Douglass demonstrated, however, enslaved children enjoyed none of these considerations. Instead of receiving proper middle-class instruction from attentive parents, the "slave-boy" was allowed to run "wild," as Douglass put it, doing "whatever his boyish nature suggests; enacting, by turns, all the strange antics and freaks of horses, dogs, pigs, and barn yard fowls," rather than having "pretty little verses to learn in the nursery" or "nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins, to show how smart he is."[14]

Narrators also wrote of the pain they experienced as parents forced to attend to the economic and domestic needs of the master's family and thus unable to come to the aid of their young, vulnerable children. Jacobs described the miserable life of her aunt, who spent her days working in their owner's household and evenings lying on the floor by their mistress's bedroom door, on call should

the mistress or her children want anything. Forced to prioritize the needs of her mistress, Jacobs's aunt's health rapidly deteriorated, and she suffered a series of miscarriages and premature deliveries. Recalling her aunt's "patient sorrow as she held the last dead baby in her arms," Jacobs blamed the woman's anguish on the mistress she had known since childhood but who still, "apparently without any compunction; and with cruel selfishness" had "rendered her poor foster-sister childless" and "ruined her health by years of incessant, unrequited toil, and broken rest."[15] Henry Bibb described his sorrow at his inability to protect his "dear little daughter" during the day. Although he and his wife, Malinda, "nurtured and caressed" the girl during the evenings, "there was no one to take care of poor little Frances, while her mother was toiling in the field." Instead, "she was left at the house to creep under the feet of an unmerciful old mistress, whom I have known to slap with her hand the face of little Frances, for crying after her mother, until her little face was left black and blue." Bibb recalled an incident in which "Malinda and myself came from the field one summer's day at noon, and poor little Frances came creeping to her mother smiling, but with large tear drops standing in her dear little eyes, sobbing and trying to tell her mother that she had been abused, but was not able to utter a word. Her little face was bruised black with the whole print of Mrs. Gatewood's hand. This print was plainly to be seen for eight days after it was done. But oh! this darling child was a slave; born of a slave mother."[16]

Northern blacks, only a generation or two removed from slavery, could hardly have remained unaffected by these stories or by Bibb's question, "Who can imagine what could be the feelings of a father and mother, when looking upon their infant child whipped and tortured with impunity, and then placed in a situation where they could afford it no protection?"[17] They not only could imagine these feelings but could remember them. Only a few decades earlier, as northern states gradually transitioned to free labor, African American families in New York, New Jersey, and New England experienced the same type of vulnerability. Consequently, antislavery discourse had the potential to raise a set of painful emotions for northern free black audiences. More than surprising revelations, they were family stories, traumatic memories, sharpened in the retelling. Sojourner Truth recalled the abuses she and others experienced as slaves in early-nineteenth-century Ulster County, New York. Even though she extolled the kindness of her final master, Mr. Dumont, she audibly groaned as she remembered "how many times I let my children go hungry, rather than take secretly the bread I liked not to ask for." Truth's interviewer noted that "she

shudders, even now, as she goes back in memory" to relive her childhood and to recall the cellar in which she, her family members, and other slaves were forced to live, "sleeping on those damp boards, like the horse" and inhaling "noxious vapors" that were "chilling and fatal to health." After describing the bloody beating she received as a nine-year-old when her native Dutch language made it impossible to understand the demands of a new English-speaking master, Truth declared, when "I hear 'em tell of whipping women on the bare flesh, it makes *my* flesh crawl, and my very hair rise on my head! Oh! my God! . . . What a way is this of treating human beings?"[18]

Moreover, while white abolitionists could choose to relate to enslaved blacks as brothers and sisters, northern free blacks often were just that—intimately connected with those in bondage by ties of blood. Indeed, Garnet took this idea as the premise for his "Address to the Slaves." "Many of you," he said, "are bound to us, not only by the ties of a common humanity, but we are connected by the more tender relations of parents, wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters, and friends." "As such," he continued, "we most affectionately address you."[19] For an audience that had relatives still living under the yoke of slavery, slave narratives detailed the continuing reality for the wives and husbands, children, siblings, friends, and parents they expected never to see again. As William Wells Brown noted near the end of his account, awareness of the fate awaiting those they left behind caused fugitives great emotional distress. "During the last night that I served in slavery," Brown recalled, "I did not close my eyes a single moment. When not thinking of the future, my mind dwelt on the past. The love of a dear mother, a dear sister, and three dear brothers, yet living, caused me to shed many tears. If I could only have been assured of their being dead, I should have felt satisfied; but I imagined I saw my dear mother in the cotton-field, followed by a merciless taskmaster, and no one to speak a consoling word to her! I beheld my dear sister in the hands of a slave-driver, and compelled to submit to his cruelty!" Noting that such visions caused him deep pain and sorrow, Brown remarked, "None but one placed in such a situation can for a moment imagine the intense agony to which these reflections subjected me."[20] For his part, the act of writing his memoirs forced Bibb to relive the experiences of his past: "It calls fresh to my mind the separation of husband and wife; of stripping, tying up and flogging; of tearing children from their parents, and selling them on the auction block. It calls to mind female virtue trampled under foot with impunity." But these memories also compelled him to confront the memory of the child he left behind. "But oh!" he wrote, "when I remember that my daugh-

ter, my only child, is still there, destined to share the fate of all these calamities, it is too much to bear."[21] When Pennington wrote an 1844 public letter to his father, mother, brothers, and sisters remaining in bondage, he indicated that he continued to feel their pain. "Mother, dear mother," he wrote, "I know, I feel, mother, the pangs of thy bleeding heart, that thou hast endured, during so many years of vexation. Thy agonies are by a genuine son-like sympathy mine; I will, I must, I do share daily in those agonies of thine."[22] These descriptions were more than sentimental conventions designed to evoke sympathy in white audiences. The knowledge that family members remained in bondage meant that the memory of slavery was never far from these writers' minds.

Slave narratives not only raised painful past memories and sharpened concerns about trapped brothers and sisters but also narrated distinct possibilities northern free blacks might yet face. Despite their residence in the free states, they, loved ones, and friends were hardly safe from being identified as or mistaken for fugitives or simply kidnapped and sold into bondage. In 1837, Jerry Morgan's wife, Margaret, and their children were forcibly carried to Maryland on the grounds that Margaret's emancipation had never been formalized, so she and her Pennsylvania-born children belonged to her former master's heir. Before the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the heir's right to claim Morgan's family as property in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), Morgan traveled to Harrisburg in the hopes that the governor of Pennsylvania might assist him in locating his wife and children and regaining their freedom. But during his return trip, a boatman misplaced Morgan's free papers, and he found himself detained on suspicion of being a runaway. Morgan's frantic escape attempt ended when he lost his footing in a desperate leap off the boat and was dragged under and drowned.[23] In another 1859 instance, the members of a family known "for their industry, sobriety, and general good behavior" were kidnapped in the dead of night and carried from Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, across the state line to Maryland. According to a report published in *Douglass's Monthly*, "The next morning the family were missing, and the house was found empty. Articles of clothing were strewn around in confusion. The bread which had been put to rise for Saturday's baking stood on the hearth ready to be worked for the oven. The bed in which the little girl had been wont to sleep showed by its rumpled state that it had been robbed of its occupant."[24] These "disappearances" were traumatic events for northern African Americans, as Samuel Ringgold Ward pointed out: "Two of my father's nephews, who had escaped to New York, were taken back in the most summary manner, in 1828. I never saw a family thrown into such deep

distress by the death of any two of its members, as were our family by the re-enslavement of these two young men. Seven-and-twenty years have past, but we have none of us heard a word concerning them, since their consignment to the living death, the temporal hell, of American slavery."[25] Enduring years of silence and uncertainty about his whereabouts, Solomon Northup's children "returned from school" one afternoon "weeping bitterly" to their mother. "On inquiring the cause of the children's sorrow, it was found that, while studying geography, their attention had been attracted to the picture of slaves working in the cotton-field, and an overseer following them with his whip. It reminded them of the sufferings their father might be, and as it happened, actually *was*, enduring in the South."[26] Narratives such as Northup's, then, also allowed northern black readers to imagine and mourn the fate that befell lost family members.

Such stories also tightened the figurative bonds among all northern free blacks and their enslaved brothers and sisters. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, James McCune Smith explained that he could not "feel free, while these, my countrymen, are stripped, and wounded, and left in the cotton fields and the rice swamps, to bleed and to die; and, among them, my own brothers and sisters, who are as dear to me as my heart's blood. . . . I am still bound with my brethren. I feel the cruel lash, and their chains."[27] Jacobs certainly thought as much. In a description that must be read as a metaphor for the race as well as a description of the love between long-lost siblings, she divulged her feelings at being reunited with her brother in New York. After spying him from an upstairs window, Jacobs "flew down stairs, opened the front door," and "in less than a minute I was clasped in my brother's arms." Jacobs noted "his old feelings of affection for me . . . were as lively as ever," for "there are no bonds so strong as those which are formed by suffering together."[28]

That suffering, slave narratives made clear, took place in the North as well as the South, for in addition to describing what happened after their friends and family members disappeared, narratives also illustrated the difficult conditions under which African Americans lived in the North. In the closing chapter of his 1837 narrative, *Slavery in the United States*, Charles Ball explained that his wife, Lucy, and their children, "all of whom had been free from their birth," had lived together in Baltimore before Ball was sold to a Georgia trader. After escaping and making his way back to Maryland, Ball learned that only a few days after his sale, his wife and children had been kidnapped "and driven into southern slavery." Overwhelmed with grief and despair, Ball rushed out of his empty house, "and returned to Pennsylvania with a broken heart." His life be-

came a kind of half freedom, and "for the last few years, I have resided about fifty miles from Philadelphia, where I expect to pass the evening of my life, in working hard for my subsistence, without the least hope of ever again seeing my wife and children:—fearful, at this day, to let my place of residence be known, lest even yet it may be supposed, that as an article of property, I am of sufficient value to be worth pursuing in my old age."[29] In other words, slavery not only deprived his free wife and children of their liberty, shattering his family just as his father's family had been broken apart a generation earlier, but also continued to shape his life in the "free" North, where he lived more like a hunted criminal than a free man.

"UNPROTECTED BY LAW OR CUSTOM"

For aspiring African Americans, representations of slavery's impact on their brothers and sisters raised serious concerns about the moral condition of the rising generation of bondspeople. Foremost among these concerns were those involving slavery's ability to corrupt the emotional instincts of young women and men.[30] Rather than looking forward to forming chaste but romantic attachments, marrying, and establishing families, former slaves wrote about how their efforts to resist slavery led them to avoid the life steps that aspiring free blacks viewed as both natural and essential for the future prospects of the race. Brown, for example, avoided marrying a woman to whom he was deeply attached: "I was determined to make another trial to get my liberty," he wrote, "and I knew that if I should have a wife, I should not be willing to leave her behind; and if I should attempt to bring her with me, the chances would be difficult for success."[31] Rather than looking forward to bearing and raising children, Ellen Craft dreaded the idea of assuming a family role that middle-class nineteenth-century writers characterized as an exalted state. According to William Craft, "My wife was torn from her mother's embrace in childhood, and taken to a distant part of the country. She had seen so many other children separated from their parents in this cruel manner, that the mere thought of her ever becoming the mother of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, appeared to fill her very soul with horror." As a result, William Craft "did not, at first, press the marriage, but agreed to assist her in trying to devise some plan by which we might escape from our unhappy condition, and then be married."[32]

Even more troubling, slave narratives repeatedly warned that slaveholders

regularly forced the best young women of the race into concubinage and prostitution. Pennington noted that "it is under the mildest form of slavery, as it exists in Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky, that the finest specimens of coloured females are reared. There are no mothers who rear, and educate in the natural graces, finer daughters than the Ethiopian women, who have the least chance to give scope to their maternal affections." But "what is generally the fate of such female slaves?" he asked. "When they are not raised for the express purpose of supplying the market of a class of economical Louisian and Mississippi gentleman, who do not wish to incur the expense of rearing legitimate families, they are nevertheless, on account of their attractions, exposed to the most shameful degradation, by the young masters in the families where it is claimed they are so well off."[33] This theme became a standard trope of antislavery discourse and a central critique of the peculiar institution. While proslavery theorists could insist that slavery was a positive good for all involved, authors of slave narratives would transgress societal norms by highlighting the sexual violence and coercion experienced by enslaved women on a daily basis.

Narrators also revealed that young women who escaped this fate and married young men of their choosing found that the marriage bond offered them no legal or personal protection. Brown explained that although "it is common for slaves to be married, there is no such thing as slaves being lawfully married. There has never yet a case occurred where a slave has been tried for bigamy. The man may have as many women as he wishes, and the women as many men; and the law takes no cognizance of such acts among slaves. And in fact some masters, when they have sold the husband from the wife, compel her to take another."[34] Bibb could barely contain his rage while discussing the vulnerability of slave marriages. After explaining that there "is no legal marriage among the slaves of the South," he declared "that every slaveholder, who is the keeper of a number of slaves of both sexes, is also the keeper of a house or houses of ill-fame." Moreover, "licentious white men, can and do, enter at night or day the lodging places of slaves; break up the bonds of affection in families; destroy all their domestic and social union for life; and the laws of the country offer them no protection."[35]

Under such circumstances, pious free blacks fretted not simply about the physical and emotional circumstances of young enslaved men and women but also about state of their souls. Despite their radical critiques of slavery and racism, some African Americans believed that even when acting under force and compulsion, men and women ultimately remained responsible for their actions

and behavior. From this perspective, slavery was an abominable system that forced their brothers and especially their sisters into a life of sin and subsequently an eternity of damnation. Indeed, Rev. Garnet highlighted this rationale for rebellion in his "Address to the Slaves": "The divine commandments, you are in duty bound to reverence and obey. If you do not obey them you will surely meet with the displeasure of the almighty. He requires you to love him supremely, and your neighbor as yourself—to keep the Sabbath day holy—to search the Scriptures—and bring up your children with respect for his laws, and to worship no other God but him." Garnet explained "slavery sets all these at naught, and hurls defiance in the face of Jehovah." But still, he believed that, "God will not receive slavery, nor ignorance, nor any other state of mind," as a substitute "for love, and obedience to him. Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation."[36] Thus, although slavery forced people to sin, northern black abolitionists, like their white counterparts, believed that enslaved African Americans who did not follow biblical precepts would ultimately reckon with the consequences of their actions after death.[37] This religious critique of the peculiar institution was powerfully damning, but it also could make navigating the mores of the northern black middle classes rather difficult for young female fugitives. For example, when Jacobs first arrived in Philadelphia, taking refuge with the family of the Reverend Jeremiah Durham, the pastor of Bethel Church, she was disheartened by his reaction to her story. Although he was deeply sympathetic to Jacobs, he discouraged her from being too candid with others about the circumstances surrounding the birth of her two children: "Your straight-forward answers do you credit; but don't answer every body so openly. It might give some heartless people a pretext for treating you with contempt." The word *contempt*, Jacobs recalled, "burned me like coals of fire." She replied, "God alone knows how I have suffered; and He, I trust, will forgive me."[38]

As Jacobs's comments suggest, those women who wrote of their experiences in slavery spoke eloquently of the power relations that circumscribed their lives and were more actively critical of the rigid religious code that seemed to condemn them for events over which they had no control.[39] In her narrative, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, Elizabeth Keckley described her situation in one curt paragraph: "I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted

me for four years, and I—I—became a mother."[40] Jacobs similarly explained, "I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me." After describing her decision to thwart her owner's advances by choosing an unmarried white gentleman as a lover and ostensible protector, Jacobs asked her free female audience for forgiveness: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another." She confessed, "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day." However, Jacobs concluded, "In looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."[41] Like Jacobs, Keckley placed the blame for her "suffering" and "mortification" squarely on the shoulders of the peculiar institution: "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."[42]

For elite and aspiring northern free black readers, stories about slavery's assault on the morality, virtue, and marital bonds of young African American women and men raised troubling questions not just about the state of their souls but also about the current and future health of the race. Because women have often served as allegorical figures of the nation in modern and ancient nationalist discourses, descriptions of the systematic abuse of enslaved African American women at the hands of slaveholders functioned as a powerful symbol for the persecution of the race.[43] For some, this was not simply a metaphor but a matter of scientific concern. After describing the physical and emotional difficulties endured by enslaved women, particularly while pregnant, Hosea Easton worried about what effects might linger and pass from mother to child. "Can it be believed to be possible," he asked in his 1837 treatise, "for such a one to bring perfect children into the world?" He continued, "If we are permitted to decide that natural causes produce natural effects, then it must be equally true that unnatural causes produce unnatural effects. The slave system is an unnatural cause, and has produced its unnatural effects, as displayed in the deformity of two and a half millions of beings, who have been under its soul-and-body-destroying influence, lineally, for near three hundred years; together

with all those who have died their progenitors since that period." He continued, "Slavery, in its effects, is like that of a complicated disease, typifying evil in all its variety—in its operations, omnipotent to destroy—in effect, fatal as death and hell." Moreover, "When I think of nature's laws, that with scrupulous exactness they are to be obeyed by all things over which they are intended to bear rule . . . I wonder that I am a man; for though of the third generation from slave parents, yet in body and mind nature has never been permitted to half finish her work."[44] Slavery, in other words, not only marred the past and blighted the present; if allowed to continue in this vein, it threatened to destroy the future.

"AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?"

In addition to portraying slavery's negative impact on African American children and families and dramatizing slaveholders' power to force young sisters and daughters into a life of immorality and sin, representations of slavery also underscored black conduct writers' anxieties regarding the state of young African American men. While slave narratives featured the successful journey to freedom and autonomy of a single individual, they also included "numerous examples of white men's power over slave men's bodies" that represented, as Kristin Hoganson has argued, "an impotence caused by the inability to resist masters."[45] The most popular piece of antislavery iconography in the Anglo-American abolitionist community was an image of the manacled slave with the caption, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" As literary scholar Paul Gilmore notes, the depiction shows a supplicant, an object of pity, rather than a subject with the ability to act on his own. Moreover, descriptions of violent restraint and sadistic punishment carried unambiguously sexual connotations for early-nineteenth-century readers accustomed to reading displays of power as pornography.[46] Consequently, these descriptions also serve as a backdrop against which black personal conduct discourse must be read. While black conduct writers and activists stressed the importance of independence and held up male authors of slave narratives as black self-made men worthy of emulation, slave narratives also depicted successive scenes of dependent black sons, husbands, and fathers unable to marry the women of their choice; prevented from reaping the benefits of their labor; trained to rely on theft, sophistry, and spirits; and powerless to protect themselves from violent, predatory, and despotic masters.

Enslaved men were unable not only to defend themselves but also to do what

free men were expected to do according to law and custom: protect the dependents in their families—particularly their female dependents—from violence and abuse. The law placed free white wives and daughters "under the protection" of their husbands and fathers, and the state assumed the wife's lack of free will and duty to depend on her husband and obey his wishes.[47] Husbands legally controlled both the body and the labor of their wives and remained responsible for most crimes they committed.[48] As the head of the household, then, fathers and husbands were entitled to gain satisfaction for assaults on their property, which included—in legal terms—dependent wives and daughters. Enslaved husbands and fathers, however, had none of these legal rights, which belonged instead to the slaveholder. For example, as Catherine Clinton writes, "If a rapist was suspected of sexual assault of a slave woman, he was charged with 'assault and battery' and, in the case of conviction, damages were paid to her owner, as would be the case in any other 'property damage.'"[49] But enslaved husbands and fathers had no recourse.

Therefore, descriptions of the abuse experienced by enslaved women not only crystallized the immorality of slavery for northern readers but also, as Hazel V. Carby writes, underscored the "denial" of "the manhood of the male slave."[50] The *Colored American* demonstrated the connection between these concepts when it printed "A Few Plain Questions for Plain Folks":

> Can a slave marry without his owner's consent? If so, quote the law; give chapter and verse.
>
> Can a slave prevent the sale of his wife if the owner pleases? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave, with impunity, refuse to flog his wife with her person all exposed, if his owner pleases to command him? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave obtain redress, if *his master* deprives him of his goods? If so, quote the law.
>
> Can a slave attend either public or private worship, without the risk of punishment, if his master forbids him? If so, quote the law.
>
> These are plain questions, which every slave owner knows can only be answered in one way.
>
> When, then, any individual gets up to tell you how well the slaves are treated, or how happy under such circumstances slaves may be, tell him that he insults your understanding, that he outrages your republican feeling, and that he dishonors God.

Claiming his right to these gender privileges, the author signed his letter, "A Husband and a Father."[51] And in 1844, James McCune Smith summed up the antislavery argument's impact on black patriarchal authority in a letter to the *New York Tribune*: "The slave has no right to his own person," and "the slave has no right to his own wife."[52] In Pennington's assessment, "Whatever may be the ill or favoured condition of the slave in the matter of mere personal treatment, it is the chattel relation that robs him of his manhood, and transfers his ownership in himself to another. It is this that transfers the proprietorship of his wife and children to another. It is this that throws his family history into utter confusion, and leaves him without a single record to which he may appeal in vindication of his character, or honour."[53] Given the solubility of the marriage bond and the inability of fathers to protect their daughters, incidents described in slave narratives suggested that enslaved African American men could never completely fulfill their duties and obligations as heads of households, protecting and caring for their dependents. As Hoganson notes, "The slave narratives used by Garrisonians to promote their cause depicted the slave man's inability to protect his family as a reflection of his own submissiveness."[54] Slave narratives, like white-authored abolitionist literature, highlighted a troubling form of enslaved male subjugation even as they celebrated those who threw off the chains of slavery.[55]

Male narrators eloquently recounted the anguish they experienced under these circumstances. After quoting several state laws detailing the legal authority of master over slave, William Craft explained that "should the bondman, of his own accord, fight to defend his wife, or should his terrified daughter instinctively raise her hand and strike the wretch who attempts to violate her chastity, he or she shall, saith the model republican law, suffer death." When describing these "worst features" of slavery, he wrote, "it is common practice in the slave States for ladies, when angry with their maids, to send them to the calybuce sugar-house, or to some other place established for the purpose of punishing slaves, and have them severely flogged." Furthermore, "it is a fact, that the villains to whom those defenceless creatures are sent, not only flog them as they are ordered, but frequently compel them to submit to the greatest indignity. Oh! if there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough to stir a man's soul, and to make his very blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling a prey to such demons!"[56]Narrators further suggested that this powerlessness created a sense of profound anxiety and distress

in enslaved men, damaging the natural bonds of affection between husbands and wives. Even after being sold to the same plantation as his wife, for example, Bibb recalled that he was far from happy. "It was not that I was opposed to living with Malinda, who was then the centre and object of my affections. But to live where I must be eye witness to her insults, scourgings and abuses, such as are common to be inflicted upon slaves, was more than I could bear. If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slavedrivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, Heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight."[57] For this reason, literary historian William L. Andrews notes, "To be the husband of a slave was to bind oneself emotionally to an exquisite form of misery."[58]

On occasion, descriptions of male repression and subjugation moved into the realm of the overtly pornographic. While living in New York City soon after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, Jacobs encountered a fugitive named Luke on his way to Canada. The two had lived near each other in North Carolina, and Jacobs "rejoiced" to see that he, too, had "escaped from the black pit" of slavery. In fact, Jacobs was "peculiarly glad" to see Luke on the road to freedom, since he had experienced "extreme hardships" at the hands of his young, weak, and bedridden but despotic master, who had lost the use of his legs after years of "excessive dissipation." According to Jacobs, Luke's master "kept a cowhide beside him, and, for the most trivial occurrence, he would order his attendant to bare his back, and kneel beside the couch, while he whipped him till his strength was exhausted. Some days [Luke] was not allowed to wear any thing but his shirt, in order to be in readiness to be flogged." And when the young master grew too weak and ill to discipline Luke, he would call the town constable into his bedroom and watch while the constable administered the corporal punishment. According to Jacobs, "A day seldom passed without his receiving more or less blows." Jacobs then abandoned the restraint that characterizes much of her narration to describe a scene of blatant sexual violence: "As he lay there on his bed, a mere degraded wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled from the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bedside of this cruel and disgusting wretch."[59] Jacobs's report of Luke's experiences shows him to be "symboli-

cally castrated, by virtue of his subjugation as a slave, his feminized/maternal duties to his master, and his master's sexual abuse."[60] This depiction contrasts mightily with Douglass's heroic account of his two-hour physical altercation with the "slave breaker" Covey, a fight that Douglass later characterized as "the turning point" in his life as a slave, the victory that "recalled to life" his "crushed self-respect" and "self-confidence" and renewed his "determination to be A FREEMAN."[61]

By contrast, recurring representations of naked, chained, and submissive young men; disordered and threatened families; and fathers who lacked the most basic paternal authority would have been extraordinarily troubling for black middle-class readers. Indeed, northern black writers worried that generations of these experiences had doomed African Americans to a kind of weakness and timidity. Delany, for example, insisted that "the degradation of the slave parent has been entailed upon the child, induced by the subtle policy of the oppressor, in regular succession handed down from father to son—a system of regular submission and servitude, menialism and dependence, until it has become almost a physiological function of our system, an actual condition of our nature."[62] And when he criticized northern blacks for being too passive about fighting for their rights, too inclined to say, "*First* seek ye the Kingdom of heaven and its righteousness, and ALL other things shall be added," Delany argued that this tendency was "but the result of oppression and degradation, a legitimate offspring, an unerring compliance with the hell-originated mandates" of the institution of slavery. "The slaveholder and pro-slavery man-debasing hypocrites of the country, have so taught our fathers, and they, unfortunately, in turn, have taught them to us."[63]

Male narrators in particular worried about the "slavish" traits they retained in freedom. In his personal narrative, Ward wrote, "It is almost impossible to spend youth, manhood, and the greater part of life, in such a condition as that of the American slave, and entirely escape, or to any great extent ever become free from, the legitimate influences of it upon the whole character." He went on, "Indeed, though I recollect nothing of slavery, I am every day showing something of my slave origin. It is among my thoughts, my superstitions, my narrow views, my awkwardness of manners. Ah, the infernal impress is upon me, and I fear I shall transmit it to my children, and they to theirs! How deeply seated, how far reaching, a curse it is!"[64] In May 1843, Douglass similarly remarked that slavery had instilled in him "a disposition I never can quite shake off, to cower before white men."[65]

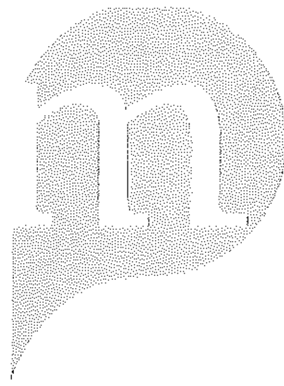
Making the political personal, Jacobs's tale and similar stories underscored why it was imperative for all African Americans, including the aspiring and elite, to embody a challenge to slavery and place their lives in the service of the freedom struggle. And northern black editors hoped that slave narratives would heighten readers' commitment to the antislavery cause. In March 1861, the *Weekly Anglo-African* published an excerpt from Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; after favorably reviewing the book, editor Thomas Hamilton declared, "No one can read these pages without a feeling of horror, and a stronger determination arising in them to tear down the cursed system which makes such records possible. Wrath, the fiery messenger which goes flaming from the roused soul and overthrows in its divine fury the accursed tyrannies of earth, will find in these pages new fuel for the fire, and new force for the storm which shall overthrow and sweep from existence American slavery."[66]

MAKING THE POLITICAL PERSONAL

The slave narratives that black newspaper editors recommended to their readers consistently argued that slavery perverted proper domestic and family relations, chipped away at women's virtue, and reduced African American fathers to an unmanly and dependent condition. The various examples of sexual exploitation and family disruption were terribly distressing for northern black audiences, for whom slavery was neither a theoretical state nor an abstract condition but rather recent family history, a constant possibility, and a continuing presence in their lives. The process of reading and writing slave narratives forced northern African Americans to relive and reimagine those experiences with the full knowledge that others continued to live under these circumstances. In this context, African American public figures such as Garnet expressed concerns not only about those who remained enslaved in the South but also about slavery's ability to continue to tear apart families in the North and to transmit its pernicious effects to future generations. These circumstances ensured that northern free black readers would interpret slave narratives in profoundly personal terms.

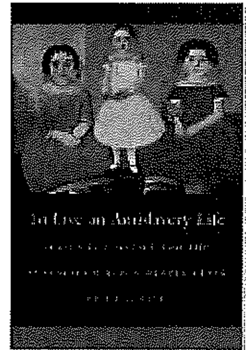
In light of the belief that the future of the race rested on the actions of aspiring African American men and women, they had a duty to do whatever possible to bring an end to the peculiar institution. This perspective heightened the need to live antislavery principles day in and day out as well as suggested that other, more satisfying ways might exist to act on antislavery credentials.

Indeed, after describing slavery's impact on African American wives, husbands, and children in his "Address to the Slaves," Garnet "referred to the fate of Denmark Vesey and his accomplices—of Nat Turner; to the burning of McIntosh, to the case of Madison Washington, as well as to many other cases—to what had been done to move the slaveholders to let go their grasp, and asked what more could be done—if we have not waited long enough—if it were not time to speak louder and longer—to take higher ground and other steps."[67]



To Live an Antislavery Life

Erica L. Ball



Published by University of Georgia Press

Ball, L..
To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class.
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
Project MUSE., https://muse.jhu.edu/.

➪ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/19536

Access provided by Drexel University (10 Dec 2018 18:26 GMT)

CHAPTER FOUR

Domestic Literature and the Antislavery Household

> At a time, alas! when every thing displeased me; when every object was disgusting; when my sufferings had destroyed all the energy and vigour of my soul; when grief had shut from my streaming eyes the beauties of nature; when frequent disappointments had bowed my soul, and rendered the whole universe a dreary tomb; when prejudice had barred the door of every honourable employment against me, and slander too held up her hideous finger; when I wished that I had not been born, or that I could retire from a world of wrongs, and end my days far from the white man's scorn; the kind attentions of a woman, were capable of conveying a secret charm, a silent consolation to my mind. Oh! nothing can render the bowers of retirement so serene and comfortable, or can so sweetly soften all our woes, as a conviction that woman is not indifferent to our fate.
>
> —"Female Tenderness," *Freedom's Journal* (1827)

Long married to a successful caterer and blessed with three children, Solomon Northup could not wait to leave behind Bayou Boeuf, Louisiana, the scene of his twelve-year captivity in slavery, and return to the "happy and prosperous life" he had once led as a farmer, carpenter, fiddler, and family man in Upstate New York. In the closing paragraphs of his 1853 narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Northup described the moment he, his wife, and two of his children were reunited. As he entered their "comfortable cottage" in Saratoga Springs, his younger daughter, Margaret, only seven years old at the time of his kidnapping, failed to recognize him. For his part, Northup was stunned by the change in Margaret's appearance, for the "little prattling girl" he remembered was now "grown to womanhood—was married, with a bright-eyed boy standing by her side." Then Northup learned that "not forgetful of his enslaved, unfortunate

grand-father, she had named the child Solomon Northup Staunton." Next, Northup's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, entered the room, and his wife, Anne, came running from the hotel in which she worked. They embraced him, "and with tears flowing down their cheeks, hung upon [Northup's] neck." Solomon and Anne's youngest son, Alonzo, was not present for the reunion, for he had traveled to the boomtowns of western New York in hopes of earning enough money to redeem his father from slavery. Still, the scene ends with domestic tranquility restored, with family members reunited and "the household gathered round the fire, that sent out its warm, and crackling comfort through the room."[1]

Northup's decision to end his slave narrative with this family tableau was not inconsequential, for descriptions of domestic space and tropes of familial relationships had long held extraordinary political significance in the United States. During the revolutionary era, for example, American spokesmen used the metaphor of family relationships—specifically those centering on parental obligations to children—to dramatize the North American colonies' disintegrating relationship with imperial Britain. Immediately after the establishment of the republic, political commentators used the example of companionate marriage to evoke the bonds that united the states for mutual happiness and the common good. These familial tropes would continue to be invoked to explain an array of political developments and debates in the nineteenth century, even providing one of the most enduring interpretations of the Civil War: brother against brother. With respect to antislavery politics, however, the connection between domestic discourse and political ideology became even more pronounced. And as Chris Dixon has argued, "Radical abolitionism was premised on the interdependence between domestic life and the outside world."[2] In fact, as historian Mary Ryan demonstrates in her analysis of antebellum domestic literature, "the abolitionist polemicists of the 1830s . . . first invested the question of slavery with domestic sentiments." And by the 1850s, the abolitionist critique of slavery had become so thoroughly intertwined with domestic discourse that the premier abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was itself a work of domestic fiction.[3]

For African Americans such as Northup, home and family held even more personal political significance. Free blacks needed only to contrast their situation with that of their brothers and sisters in the South to recall that the right to have one's marriage protected by law was a privilege millions of African Americans did not share. And this knowledge shaped northern blacks' perceptions of their privileges as free men and women as well as their critique of slavery. In

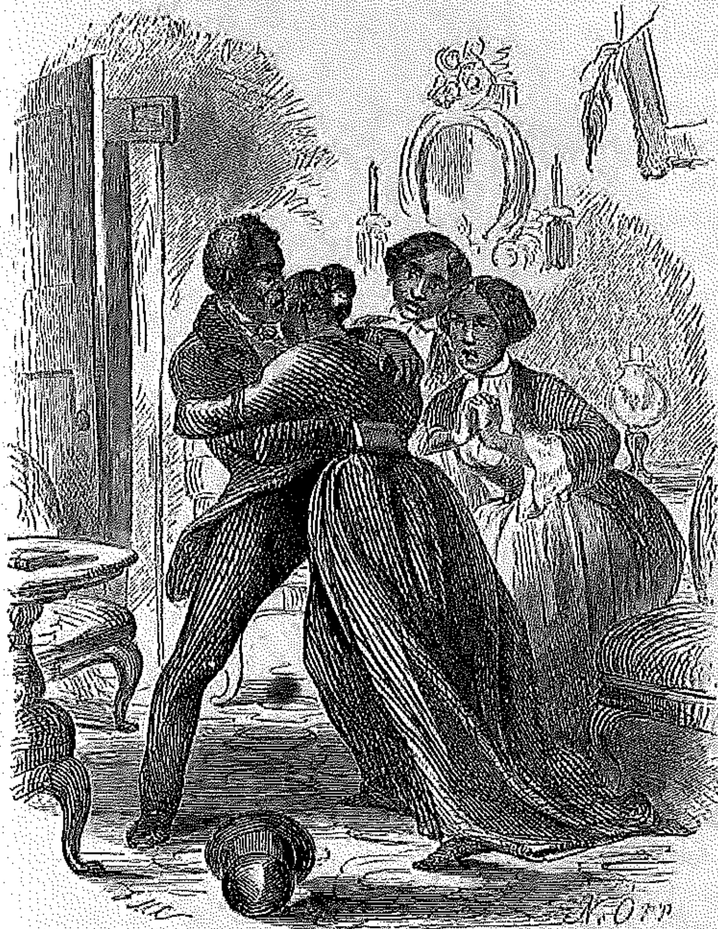


Figure 3. "Arrival Home, and First Meeting with His Wife and Children." From Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana* (Auburn, N.Y.: Derby and Miller, 1853). Image courtesy of Documenting the American South, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

a letter published in the *Colored American*, for example, one free black reader placed black families at the heart of his interpretation of the meaning of freedom. First, he noted, "the dwelling of the black man is protected by the same laws which protect the dwelling of the white man. The colored mother, as well as the white mother, feels that her children are her own." The northern African American "is a free man in his own quiet dwelling, and the children, who play at his door, or gather round his evening fire, are under the protection of the same laws which give peace and security to his white neighbor's dwelling." In addition, northern men and women could make their own marriage choices and have their marriages sanctioned by the state. "No one can deprive the colored husband of his rights, or the colored wife of her protection." The enslaved man, however, "holds his wife but by permission from his master, and when his master says the word, he must give his wife to another, and take another to himself." These personal and familial rights meant a great deal to members of the northern black activist community. As the writer put it, "The free colored man of the north considers it an inestimable privilege that he can be the protector of his daughters, and unite them with their associates in lawful and honorable marriage."[4] In this view, freedom was not only an individual's natural right but also restored proper relations and paternal authority to African American families.

Charged as this idea was with intense political significance, northern black ministers, writers, and activists had much to say about African American domestic concerns long before Northup's sentimental family tableau appeared in print. Didactic pronouncements on child rearing could be found in political pamphlets penned by black ministers, and counsel on courtship, marriage, and family governance was woven into political and religious commentary from editorials in the African American press to speeches at black state and national conventions.[5] As a vignette on "Female Tenderness" that appeared in *Freedom's Journal* in 1827 suggests, African American domestic writers consistently linked middle-class ideals about gender, home, family, and domestic space to the project of living an antislavery life, placing both the free black home and African American women's influence and domesticity in the service of the private day-to-day war free African Americans waged against the nation's proslavery culture.[6] Familial relationships (particularly those between mothers, sisters, and daughters and their male kin), these authors argued, helped individuals live up to their antislavery principles, while the ideal black family served as the engine of the antislavery struggle, an essential part of the race's ascendance from

slavery to freedom. Such claims took advantage of the common understanding that families were simultaneously private entities shaped by conjugal love, mutual affection, and ties of kinship and political institutions regulated by the laws of the state.[7] To ensure that aspiring African Americans created ideal families and domestic spaces, black domestic writers urged free African Americans to create the ideal antislavery household by attending to their domestic duties and obligations as husbands and wives, actively employing female influence, and thoroughly inculcating antislavery values in their children. In the process, the free black home and its attendant familial relationships were positioned as a privileged antislavery space and the barometer of the future health of the race.

CREATING AN ANTISLAVERY HOUSEHOLD

By 1857, when Frances Ellen Watkins, a popular young black abolitionist lecturer, published "Report," a poem offering advice to young courting men on ideal female character, and "Advice to the Girls," a humorous poem urging young women to choose "good and kind" husbands with "common sense," she was contributing her insight and wit to a wide-ranging and growing body of African American marriage advice. In fact, by the 1830s, many of the columns and editorials in *Freedom's Journal*, the *Weekly Advocate*, and the *Colored American* were presenting marriage and the establishment of a household as essential for the happiness of young aspiring African American men and women. To underscore this point, *Freedom's Journal* and other newspapers reprinted humorous cautionary tales from contemporary British novels and journals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*. "The Old Maid's Thermometer," "The Bachelor's Thermometer," the story of "Miss Becky Duguid," and similar tales outlined the tragic consequences that awaited those who put off marriage. "The Bachelor's Thermometer," for example, explained how a handsome but prideful twenty-four-year-old man too pleased with his own virtues to marry the woman he truly loved soon found himself an irritable fifty-something battling gout and an unpleasant gastrointestinal disorder, lonely and pathetic enough to marry his unrefined maid.[8] Likewise, "The Old Maid's Diary" (the less sexually suggestive title the editors of *Freedom's Journal* apparently chose for "The Old Maid's Thermometer") detailed how an amiable and attractive young lady who was so fond of charming all those around her that she refused to settle on one suitor grew up to become an unmarried, "ill-humoured," lonely woman in her forties who turned "all her sensibility to cats and dogs."[9] After reading a reprinted ex-

cerpt from Susan Edmoundstone Ferrier's novel, *Marriage*, the readers of *Freedom's Journal* may well have giggled at the lessons learned by "Miss Becky Duguid," who had intended to remain single, bucking tradition and "escap[ing] the snares and anxieties of the married state," the "indifference or the ill-humour of husbands," and "the troubles and vexations of children." "But poor Miss Becky soon found her mistake." She discovered that as an aging unmarried aunt, she was constantly expected to sit with a "dull and sickly wife" or an "ill-natured husband" or to "nurse the children" of her siblings, never invited to "any party of pleasure."[10]

While the leisured circumstances suggested in these stories bore little resemblance to the lives led by the overwhelming majority of northern free blacks, that antebellum black newspapers printed such tales suggests that free black readers (or at least editors) found them both amusing and instructive. In many respects, these tales, which relied heavily on the cultural tropes favored by mainstream middle-class society, used humor to construct and reaffirm the boundaries of an emerging black middle-class community. But they were also intended to warn the young men and women of the race that those who delayed marriage too long or made themselves unappealing to the opposite sex might miss their chances and end up like Tabitha Wilson, "a most venomous backbiting old maid of forty-five."[11]

These decidedly flip descriptions of the consequences of avoiding matrimony were supplemented with letters, stories, and sermons on the results of ill-advised matches. After tiring of paying for slander suits brought against his wife, "Job" used the black press to publicly declare that his wife, "a leading member of this society," is "one of the greatest shrews of whom you ever heard" and that her tongue "goes as steadily as the clack of a mill." He advised other young men to choose their wives more wisely.[12] Speeches reprinted in *Freedom's Journal* also taught young women to be prudent when selecting husbands. In 1827, for example, *Freedom's Journal* reprinted "The Intemperate Husband" from an address delivered before the Massachusetts Society for Suppressing Intemperance. According to the speaker, "when a husband and father forgets the duties he once delighted to fulfil, and by slow degrees becomes the creature of intemperance, there enters into his house the sorrow that rends the spirit—that cannot be alleviated, that will not be comforted." The speaker asked his audience to visualize and "to behold him," in his sad state, "fallen away from the station he once adorned, degraded from eminence to ignominy—at home, turning his dwelling to darkness, and its holy endearments to mockery—abroad, thrust

from the companionship of the worthy, a self-branded outlaw—this is the wo that the wife feels is more dreadful than death,—that she mourns over, as worse than widowhood!"[13] Such lectures did far more than remind young men to avoid the grog shop and the bottle. They also made clear that young women who placed themselves under the protection of such husbands would eventually pay a steep price. Similarly, in "The Slovenly Wife," a cautionary tale reminding young women to put the needs of their households above the inanities of fashion, young male readers were taught to be wary of the hidden costs involved in the maintenance of fashionable young wives. Published in the *Colored American* in 1838, the parable described "Hester S.," the "youngest daughter of a respectable mechanic," as a young woman whose "beauty was proverbial. . . . Too ardent a love for showy dress, in preference to neatness, seemed her only fault." But her husband soon learned that this seemingly minor character flaw had extraordinary consequences. Rather than attending to her household duties, she spent her husband's money on extravagant dresses, driving him into debt. Over time, "his flourishing business and his handsome wife became more and more neglected. . . . Creditors now visited in lieu of customers. The goods were sold; the shop was soon closed. The husband had become a drunkard, and the once beloved and yet beautiful wife, sinking under the combined effects of poverty, and shame, and remorse, found out too late that she was the unhappy cause of their mutual wretchedness and ruin. Thus ends a true but humble tale, told by A WIFE."[14]

When we connect this discourse with the political function of marriage itself, we see that these decisions to delay marriage or choose inappropriate spouses were not inconsequential to elite and aspiring African Americans. An alcoholic husband would inevitably abandon his responsibilities, leaving his family and home in ruins. A gossiping wife could squander her husband's wealth on slander suits. A wife who cared more about her personal appearance than managing her household might soon lead all the members of the family to poverty, shame, and ruin. Conversely, an "ideal" marriage (and thus a healthy household) promised to improve a man's economic prospects and enlarge his political status. These ideas were hardly new. As historian Nancy Cott reminds us, American political figures had long "assumed that marriage and property-holding and heading a family were closely related as attributes of citizen-voters." And in the republican political theory that continued to influence political and domestic ideologies, a man's ability to function as an independent head of a family with a dependent wife and children served as one of

the primary examples of his independence and political capacity—that is, his ability to act as a disinterested citizen who could wield suffrage appropriately and contribute to a virtuous body politic.[15] Legal marriage conferred head-of-household status on husbands, thus cementing their standing as guardians of dependents. Through the marriage vows, the wife gained protection of her husband, and by becoming one with him, she enlarged his political capacity, reaffirming his position as head of the household. In other words, if "participatory citizenship in the American political tradition required" independence, it was defined not solely by land, wealth, and self-mastery but also through the polity of the family.[16] With this idea in mind, black domestic discourse implied that one's marriage choice bore a direct relationship to one's ability to live an antislavery life.

Indeed, slave narratives sometimes highlighted the moments when their narrators changed their marital status, marking this moment as the final stage of their ascent to freedom. For example, both Frederick Douglass and Henry Bibb concluded their self-transformations with the exchange of formal wedding vows with a free black woman. Near the conclusion of his narrative, Bibb noted that he ultimately married the eligible Mary Miles of Boston, his "bosom friend, a help-meet, a loving companion in all the social, moral, and religious relations of life." Bibb also pointed out that other fugitives acted similarly with regard to these personal family matters: "I am happy to state that many fugitive slaves, who . . . escape to the free North with those whom they claim as their wives, notwithstanding all their ignorance and superstition, are not at all disposed to live together like brutes, as they have been compelled to do in slaveholding Churches. But as soon as they get free from slavery they go before some anti-slavery clergyman, and have the solemn ceremony of marriage performed according to the laws of the country."[17] Similarly, Douglass recalled that a few days after making his way to New York and finding shelter in the home of David Ruggles, the leader of the city's Vigilance Society, Ruggles sent for Douglass's fiancée, Anna, and soon after her arrival in New York City, "Mr. Ruggles called in the Rev. J. W. C. Pennington, who, in the presence of Mr. Ruggles, Mrs. Michaels, and two or three others, performed the marriage ceremony." After receiving their certificate of marriage, "I shouldered one part of our baggage, and Anna took up the other, and we set out forthwith."[18] These descriptions of marriage functioned as more than just a conventional happy ending for the narrator. They symbolized the final step in the ascendance from slavery to freedom, from the dependence of enslavement to independence. By marrying,

former slaves placed themselves fully in the position of independent men, ready to wield the legal privileges of any free man.

To help husbands shore up their status as independent heads of households, black domestic literature focused heavily on the roles and responsibilities of African American wives, urging them to act like proper dependents in two key ways. First, black conduct writers offered a primer on how to avoid the kind of behavior that might subvert a husband's authority. Editors regularly pointed out that a man preferred not to marry a woman with "a babbling tongue" by printing letters from men who swore they would "rather dwell in the dens of the Caucasus, and abide two years at Liberia, than remain one month in the town that is blest with her residence." This was strong condemnation, indeed, given the free black population's overwhelming opposition to the American Colonization Society's plan to remove free African Americans to Liberia.[19] Editors also instructed female readers to nurture happiness in their marriages by remaining pious and good-natured and by deferring to their husbands' authority. The *Colored American* advised wives to "resolve every morning to be cheerful and good-natured," to "dispute not" with their husbands, and to remember that while "submission in a man to his wife is even disgraceful to both . . . implicit submission in a wife to the will of her husband is what she promised at the altar."[20]

These admonitions, as scholars have noted, conformed to the same middle-class domestic ideals and practices celebrated by white conduct writers and failed to challenge prevailing discourses of female inferiority.[21] But these views were not necessarily incompatible with a radical antislavery agenda. William Lloyd Garrison, a founder of the American Antislavery Society and an exemplar of white radical abolitionism, for example, reprinted a series of maxims on spousal duties and obligations in the pages of the *Liberator*, a newspaper with many African American subscribers. Maxim 3 stated, "She never attempts to rule or appear to rule her husband. Such conduct degrades husbands—and wives always partake largely in the degradation of their husbands." Similarly, Maxim 6 proclaimed, "She never attempts to interfere in his business, unless he ask her advice or counsel, and never attempts to control him in the management of it." Husbands, for their part, were counseled to listen to their wives' sound judgment and to enlist them in the battle against economic disaster. For "if she have prudence and good sense he consults her on all great operations, involving the risk of ruin, or serious injury in case of failure." Since "many a man has been rescued from ruin by the wise counsels of his wife," readers

were urged to remember that "a husband can never procure a counsellor more deeply interested in his welfare than his wife."[22]

As Maxim 6 suggests, in addition to reminding wives to be appropriately (rather than overly) submissive, abolitionist domestic writers instructed women to help their husbands in the family's economic pursuits, framing these behaviors as essential for the enhancement of the husbands' political capacity. Not only did a husband and father demonstrate his political capacity by virtue of the contrast between his legal status and the dependents in his household, but he also needed to maintain the household's economic independence.[23] Wives were urged to help by economizing and by offering wise advice and counsel when appropriate. Toward these ends, black domestic writers consistently echoed the advice of white domestic writer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, who characterized wifely frugality as essential in a "land of precarious fortunes" racked by stock market crashes and boom-and-bust economic cycles and encouraged free black women to attend to the tasks of housework and manage their homes with an eye toward improving their family's financial condition.[24] In "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality" (1831), Maria Stewart directed free black women to pay close attention to their household expenditures: "Let each one strive to excel in good housewifery, knowing that prudence and economy are the road to wealth. Let us not say we know this, or we know that, and practise nothing; but let us practise what we do know."[25] And "are there not many wives . . . who can thus lighten their husband's hearts, and keep their purses heavy?" inquired a piece on frugal housewives reprinted in an 1860 issue of the *Weekly Anglo-African* newspaper. "Look twice before you throw it aside. Don't put those old pantaloons into the carpet rags or the mop until you have patched them once more. Let the tuck down in the little girl's dress; make the old ribbon trim the little bonnet again; get the boots mended; buy a little trimming for that old sack, and it will look as well as new. Contrive and economize, and you will be happier; discipline yourself better, do more good, and set a better example than if you had plenty of money and lived carelessly."[26] Framed in this way, a wife's attention to domestic economy provided a crucial means for women to help their husbands prosper, retain economic independence, and thus demonstrate political capacity.

Wives of this type, black domestic writers suggested, would serve as perfect complements and partners for the mechanics, farmers, doctors, and divines championed as exemplars of antislavery living by the Reverend Samuel Ringgold Ward and others. Consequently, black conduct writers also urged young

women to get the proper training to be of service to their husband's pursuit of economic independence. "Each sex," wrote the Reverend Lewis Woodson, "should receive that education which is best calculated to qualify them for a discharge of their appropriate duties."[27] For many people, this idea meant that young African American women should "acquire an education which will fit them to become the wives of an enlightened mechanic, a store keeper, or a clerk."[28] Charles B. Ray emphasized this point almost immediately after the death of his young wife, Henrietta, submitting a series of editorials to the *Colored American* arguing that "our daughters" should receive "a solid education" consisting first and foremost "of the use of the needle, house work, and domestic economy generally." Ray complained that many young African American women lacked the proper knowledge of housewifery, a deficiency he believed to be "the cause of the greatest amount of domestic broils, and contentions, the cause of so many abandoned females [and an impetus for] intemperance, suicide, and to all the prevailing evils of the day." To avoid disaster, Ray suggested that girls first remain at home with their mothers to learn "all the art of domestic cookery" and to "be taught to know how to manage a house, and govern and instruct children." Only after mastering these skills should they be sent away for further education.[29] In the 1850s, Martin Delany made a case for a more expanded list of duties, explicitly insisting that young women be trained to be partners in their husband's economic ventures: "Let our young women have an education; let their minds be well informed; well stored with useful information and practical proficiency, rather than the light superficial acquirements, popularly and fashionably called accomplishments. We desire accomplishments, but they must be *useful*." Rather than simply "transcribing in their blank books recipes for *Cooking*; we desire to see them making the transfer of *Invoices of Merchandise*." These efforts would not only enhance their husbands' independence but also strengthen the larger effort to build up a mighty race. Consequently, he called for young African American women to "come to our aid then; the *morning* of our *Redemption* from degradation, adorns the horizon."[30]

This type of idealized economic partnership is also visible in the *Colored American*'s story of Harry and Mary Hemphill, which illustrated both an ideal version of wifely frugality and its positive impact on the industry and morality of a young man. When the newly wed Hemphills set up housekeeping in the country (away from the temptations Harry would have faced in the city), Mary turned "her whole attention" to things domestic, so that "all went like clock work at home; the family expenditures were carefully made; not a farthing was

wasted, not a scrap lost; the furniture was all neat and useful, rather than ornamental; the table plain, frugal, but wholesome and well spread; little went either to the seamstress or the tailor; no extravagance in dress, no costly company-keeping, [and] no useless waste of time in ceaseless visiting." In short, Mary created an ideal home where Harry could seek "repose after the toil and weariness of the day" and forget "the heartlessness of the world, and all the wrongs of men." Harry "devoted himself to business with steady purpose and untiring zeal; he obtained credit by his plain and honest dealing; custom by his faithful punctuality and constant cares; friends by his obliging deportment and accommodating disposition." He ultimately "gained the reputation of being the best workman in the village," the family thrived, "and he and Mary mutually [gave] each other the credit" for their success. The author then charged his younger readers, both male and female, with following the characters' examples: "I pen their simple history in the hope, that as it is entirely imitable, some who read it will try to imitate it."[31]

Once established, these stable and independent households could play important roles for the northern black abolitionist community, serving as key forums for antislavery men and women to gather for abolitionist, literary, and vigilance committee meetings as well as serving as stops on the Underground Railroad.[32] For example, Ruggles attended to "a number of other fugitive slaves," including Douglass, from home, "devising ways and means for their successful escape."[33] Other northern free blacks similarly made their homes havens for fugitives on the flight to freedom. When Ward's parents arrived in New York City on August 3, 1826, with young Samuel in tow, they "lodged the first night" with the parents of Henry Highland Garnet.[34] And when she arrived in Philadelphia after escaping from North Carolina, young Harriet Jacobs received shelter, advice, and instruction on how to proceed to New York from the Reverend Jeremiah Durham and his wife. Jacobs was deeply grateful for the Durhams' kindness and hospitality. "I was tired," Jacobs recalled, and Mrs. Durham's "friendly manner was a sweet refreshment. God bless her! I was sure that she had comforted other weary hearts, before I received her sympathy."[35]

More than simply safe havens, these domestic spaces functioned as political spaces for those African Americans who aspired to place every aspect of their lives in the service of the freedom struggle. While traveling as a correspondent for Douglass's *North Star* in 1848 and 1849, Delany took time out from his description of the many organizations and institutions African Americans had built in western Pennsylvania to praise two of the families who had

welcomed him into their homes. These husbands and their "intelligent wives" were more than just kind hosts and hostesses for weary travelers: they were men and women who fashioned their homes into antislavery spaces. In Harrisburg, Delany was hosted by "John Williams, and his intelligent lady," who "most kindly received me the night that stupid ignorance and wicked prejudice debarred me from shelter, and at whose door the antislavery latch-string always hangs out." Delany also thanked "John Wolf, and his amiable, intelligent lady, whose house also keeps the welcome knocker to the Anti-Slavery pilgrim on the door." Delany interpreted the hospitality of these couples as examples of private ways that families who "take high anti-slavery ground, feeling closely identified with their people, and stand ready at any time," could "enter into measures for the support of the cause, and those who are faithfully laboring for our elevation."[36]

DEMOCRATIZING FEMALE INFLUENCE

Black domestic writers not only linked the duties and obligations of spouses to efforts to claim independence for the race but also imbued emerging middle-class ideas about true womanhood and female influence with antislavery meaning. Female influence was a relatively new concept in the early republic, one heavily praised and promoted by mainstream American domestic writers. By midcentury, the concept defined hegemonic gender ideals, serving as a key component of the construction of early-nineteenth-century middle-class domesticity. While white conduct writers instructed newly middle-class white American men to live up to celebrations of "self-made men" (independent agents striving for success in the emerging capitalist marketplace), they expected a class of "true women" (that is, innately pious, moral, virtuous, and submissive women) to preside over a separate domestic sphere that served as a pure and safe space set apart from the forces of the corrupt outside world. Antebellum writers routinely characterized this domestic sphere as women's ideal arena, the space where they would exercise their purifying moral influence on the men in their lives. If women properly fulfilled these duties, their influence would ultimately result in a more moral, pious, and perfect world.[37]

Of course, few African American women had the luxury of remaining cloistered within a domestic sphere. Even if they had wanted to do so, the circumstances in which most free African Americans lived made it difficult for free black women to conform to the strictest interpretations of separate spheres

and ideal domesticity. The majority of the married and unmarried free black women residing in the northern states worked for wages—usually in "demanding, undesirable, and poorly paid" positions as domestics or laundresses—or supplemented their families' income by taking in boarders.[38] Free black women across the economic spectrum participated in a variety of associations, among them church-related societies and abolitionist organizations. Consequently, historians agree, black conduct writers' descriptions of women's proper place as the private domestic sphere rather than the public world of wage labor ignored free black women's needs as wage workers and perhaps even helped to limit black women's opportunities to claim more visible leadership roles in the many organizations in which they participated.[39]

While scholars are right to point out the distance between the idealized rhetoric and the reality of free black women's lives, African American domestic writers also redefined the rhetoric of female influence, turning it toward the political needs of the African American population. Rather than insisting on a limited domestic sphere for a small class of elite African American women, black domestic writers instead praised a democratized version of female influence so that all respectable African American women—irrespective of their participation in the public world of wage labor—were deemed purveyors of qualities generally presumed to be reserved for middle-class whites alone. According to *Freedom's Journal*, all women were "formed to adorn and humanize mankind, to sooth his cares, and strew his path with flowers."[40] In this way, African American domestic writers consistently emphasized the most democratic vision of female influence, claiming an ideal to which all African American women could aspire, irrespective of their economic status, prior condition, participation in the wage labor economy, or role in abolitionist and community organizations.

This is especially apparent in a letter on "Female Influence" from "Ellen," published in the September 30, 1837, issue of the *Colored American*. First acknowledging the "delicacy" that its author, "a young and unknown female," had to "overcome" before "writing for the public press," she explained that her "anxiety" for the "elevation of [her] people, and the improvement of [her] sex" compelled her to address the public. The author insisted that women had important roles at every stage of their lives. As mothers, she argued, women should watch carefully over their young sons, "train their minds to virtue," and "instill into them true Moral and Religious principles." As sisters, young women and girls could keep their "brothers in the path in which a mother's care had led them,"

providing a counterweight to the "rich" and "imaginative fancies" and "buoyant feelings of youth" that might lure even the most virtuous of young men away from the family fold. Finally, as a wives, young women should be willing to "assist" in their husbands' "literary labors," ever ready to offer "judicious counsel and advice" and to "incite" their husbands "to deeds of valor and patriotism." Ultimately, "whether as a mother, sister, or wife," women "can throw a halo around the domestic hearth, and make HOME the delight of man, and the place he will seek with ardour after the toils of the day, or the anxiety and care attendant on business or study." For this reason, the "appropriate sphere for the female to use her influence over man is the domestic fireside. There she can show her power over the lords of creation—there she can shine her true glory." "Whether the female move in the highest walks of society, or toils with laborious assiduity in the peasant's cot," according to this author, "still the influence she exerts is the same. Whether she treads majestically the monarchial palace, or groans beneath the lash of the Southern task-master; whether she roams the Western prairies, the untutored child of nature, or sings the song of love in the luxurious gardens of Persia's golden empire, she has the same heavenly influence over man, which she can exercise for his good or evil—for his misery or his happiness."[41] In this way, "Ellen" and other black domestic writers characterized female influence as an innate attribute of all women, irrespective of race, class, or condition of servitude.

Placing a democratized interpretation of female influence within the framework of specific familial roles and celebrating female influence as innate to all virtuous black mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters performed a specific ideological function for aspiring northern African Americans. By celebrating female influence, black domestic writers created an image of black femininity that challenged the key gender constructions at the heart of the institution of slavery. As historian Jennifer Morgan has demonstrated, enslaved women's reproductive capacity gave British New World slavery its distinctive characteristic of perpetuity. Irrespective of the familial bonds that united and sustained the slave community, the law defined enslaved women simply as the personal property of their white owners, and under this system, enslaved women's bodies produced and reproduced the agricultural and human commodities of slave societies, expanding owners' estates. Categorized as merchandise, enslaved women of African descent could be separated from their families, stripped naked and examined publicly by prospective buyers, and sold as chattel to the highest bidder. Gender offered no protection.[42]

By the nineteenth century, antebellum proslavery writers, intellectuals, scientists, and theologians had constructed the cultural apparatus that framed this harsh economic reality, describing enslaved women in a set of terms far removed from the sentimental phrases used to characterize the nature of the "true women" of the republic. In religious literature, popular novels, historical romances, and natural and social science publications, "proslavery intellectuals created three specific images—the 'mammy,' the 'Jezebel,' and the 'mule'—as preeminent features of the dominant ideology that justified their exploitation of female slaves."[43] And as historian Deborah Gray White has demonstrated, "One of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character." This cultural trope of a highly sensual and remarkably fertile woman of African descent affirmed and reaffirmed a system where enslaved women were regularly viewed in various states of undress in the fields, at the whipping post, and on the auction block, where their fertility could be discussed in polite conversation, their marital status sundered at will, and their daughters sold off as courtesans to take part in what was politely known as the "fancy trade."[44] As a whole, this discourse insisted that the phrase *slave woman* signified "burden bearing, domestic servitude, and libidinous self-absorption."[45]

These "controlling images" undoubtedly shaped white perceptions of northern free black women as well.[46] Edward Clay's caricatures of elite and aspiring free black women in Philadelphia emphasized features that would have been perceived as the antithesis of the ideal of white womanhood. Instead of wearing chaste and modest dress, Clay's female figures sport ridiculously large hats and wear ostentatious dresses with ridiculously oversized sleeves and absurdly wide skirts. And with but a few exceptions, the characters are short, squat, and drawn with impossibly dark skin, large hands, and giant feet. By contrast, when Clay lampoons Philadelphia's white elites for their ardent love of the latest fashions, his white female caricatures retain their pale skin, delicate features, and, most important, tiny hands and feet—symbols of feminine beauty in the period. Clay asks his reader to laugh at the absurdity of the middle-class black woman. And at a time when female arms and legs were considered so delicate and private that they were politely referred to as "limbs," Clay highlights the singular oddity of the black female body by having his figure receive coal black stockings in response to her request for "flesh coloured" ones.

Even abolitionists, who sought to challenge proslavery arguments by showing that enslaved women suffered horribly, unwittingly helped to shore up these

Figure 4. "Have you any flesh coloured silk stockings, young man?" "Oui, Madame! here is von pair of de first qualité!" From Edward W. Clay, *Life in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Simpson, 1829). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

perceptions.[47] As scholars have argued, consistent depictions of violence against partially clothed or nude black women registered as pornographic in the antebellum northern middle-class mind. As historian Catherine Clinton notes, "Whipping itself can be a symbol of male will and lashing a form of sexual sublimation."[48] And constant denunciations of the South as "one great Sodom," a "place in which men could indulge their erotic impulses with impunity," and a culture where enslaved women regularly "lured young slaveholders into illicit attachments," inadvertently helped to confirm the prevailing controlling image of black women as overly sexual seductresses—Jezebels.[49] Consequently, these depictions could not but reinforce the dominant ideological beliefs that rooted deviant sexuality in the body of the black woman.

Such representations of African American women, free or enslaved, thus "existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood."[50] By the late eighteenth century, the terms *slave* and *black* had become synonymous and were often used interchangeably in the United States; similarly, the phrases *enslaved women* and *black women* must have been indistinguishable. In this context, no woman of African descent could ever be the pure, pious, submissive paragon of domesticity celebrated as a true woman by mainstream conduct writers. In other words, even if conventional wisdom dictated that "a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found," most white Americans believed that this "true woman" upheld the republic with her "frail white hand."[51]

Embodying and personifying a challenge to this racialized interpretation of true womanhood had the potential to take on a subversive meaning for free African American women. It provided a way for aspiring African American women at all stages of their lives to contest proslavery ideologies within their private dwellings. On a day-to-day basis, a wife could place her domesticity in the service of her family rather than a master or employer. Scholar Gayle T. Tate has argued that this domestic labor—"household management, task-orientation, decision making processes, and goal-setting behavior"—functioned as a critical form of black women's activism.[52] Caring for their families in this way might have empowered free black women, particularly those who had grown up with the expectation that their official duty would be serving the families of their owners. But female influence also enabled them to wield a specific form of gendered power within the family circle and to demand a level of respect and deference that they would rarely receive outside the walls of their homes. For aspiring women who worked for wages, this insistence that female

influence was innate, that they too were ideal women, would have provided a powerful reminder of their slender and tenuous privileges as free women.

African American domestic writers also regularly placed female influence directly in the service of the larger antislavery enterprise. Indeed, a mother's influence was characterized as so powerful that it could pull a wayward young man off the road to ruin and back onto the path of antislavery living. Thus, by attending to their role within the domestic sphere, mothers served as the first line of defense against the moral corruption of vulnerable young African American men. For example, an essay on "Maternity" in the *Colored American* noted that while "women's charms are certainly many and powerful," motherhood has a power "beyond this world." After discussing men's love for their mothers—"'Tis our first love!"—as well as the glory and sanctity of the state of motherhood itself, the author charged that "he who can enter an apartment, and behold the tender babe feeding upon its mother's beauty, nourished by the tide of life which flows through her generous veins, without a panting bosom and grateful eye, is no man, but a monster . . . and is fit only for the shadow of darkness and the solitude of the desert." The editors of the *Colored American* stated their hopes that "fathers and children" would read the piece, circulate it, and enable it to "be the instrumentality in reclaiming some besotted husband, or long lost profligate son."[53]

Black domestic writers also connected black women's influence within the home to their institution-building efforts in the free black community. For example, on January 7, 1837, in the first issue of the *Weekly Advocate*, an editorialist addressed a piece "To the Females of Colour," urging them to use their "powerful" female "influence" to support the fledgling journal by making it a fixture in their homes: "Let not our hopes of its success be indulged in vain, for want of effort on your part to sustain it."[54] And in 1857, when Mary Still published a pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Females of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, she placed the "female part of the Church" at the center of a half century of African American community building and antislavery activism, inviting female readers to lend their support to the denomination's new newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, which had been forced to suspend publication in 1856 as a consequence of lack of funds. Women, she proclaimed, had been central "to the advancement of great moral enterprizes" throughout the history of the world. In fact, "the moral or degraded condition of society depends solely upon the influence of woman, if she be virtuous, pious and industrious, her feet abiding in her own house, ruleing her family well." For Still, "Such a woman is like a

tree planted by the river side, whose leaves are evergreen; she extends in her neighborhood a healthy influence, and all men calleth her blessed."[55] While Still doubtless would have disagreed with the previous generation's more limited vision of the scope of female influence, she would have agreed with earlier authors that female influence, rooted as it was in the domestic relationships between wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters and their male kin, made the well-ordered free black home and family a crucial institution for antislavery living.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that this idealization of race-specific female influence may have shaped the courtship and marriage choices of young elite and aspiring African American men and women. In 1837, Henry Highland Garnet described his future wife, Julia Williams, in glowing terms: "Oh what a lively being she is! Modest, susceptible, and chaste, a good Christian and a scholar."[56] John Mercer Langston also portrayed his wife as the embodiment of this ideal. Caroline M. Wall, whom Langston married on October 25, 1854, was a "talented, refined and pleasant person in appearance and conduct. . . . [W]ith her brothers and younger sister respecting and honoring her authority, while she bore herself with dignity, self-possession and propriety, he discovered in her those elements of genuine womanly character which make the constitution of the true, loving and useful wife. He discovered too, in her conversation and behavior, that she was fully informed as to the condition of the colored people, with whom she was identified in blood in her maternal relationships, and deeply and intelligently interested in their education and elevation."[57] Such a wife would certainly be an ideal partner and helpmeet and an asset in the antislavery struggle.

CHILD REARING

Scholars have noted that social protest, whether "civil rights, anti-slavery, or general social reform," tended to be a family endeavor for antebellum free blacks. Historian Wilma King has argued that "childhood experiences in homes" often shaped "an individual's social consciousness."[58] And James Oliver Horton has found that "if one member of a family was involved" in antislavery activism, then "other family members were likely to take part."[59] Indeed, the evidence supports these claims. For example, William Watkins, who published several letters under the pseudonym "Colored Baltimorean," founded the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth, an institution that offered a classical curriculum to its students. His niece, Frances Ellen Watkins, whom he adopted

after the death of her mother, continued the activist tradition, becoming a famous member of the abolitionist lecture circuit as well as a poet and novelist.[60] Susan Paul and Mary Ann Shadd followed in the footsteps of their activist fathers, Thomas Paul and Abraham Shadd, respectively. William G. Nell, founder of the Massachusetts General Colored Association, helped to mold the political sensibilities of his son, William Cooper Nell, a fixture of the abolitionist community. The Douglass and Easton families spawned multiple generations of activists.[61] And the children and grandchildren of James and Charlotte Forten would grow to become leaders in African American and interracial antislavery gatherings.[62]

So it should come as no surprise that antebellum black writers and ministers paid great attention to child rearing, offering advice and instruction on the proper political, moral, and intellectual education of children and instructing parents to provide the tools that would enable children to become ideal antislavery men and women. At the 1839 annual meeting of the State Temperance Society of Colored Americans, participants resolved "that it is the duty of every female in this society constantly in season, and out of season, to instill into the minds of all the children and youth the principles of temperance."[63] Saying that "work never hurts the child," John Berry Meachum urged "every father or mother, or any head of a family," to "endeavor to raise our children with as much industry as we possibly can." Reminding aspiring mothers and fathers of the importance of social graces, he suggested that parents "see particularly" that their children "are raised up nicely in their manners and their deportment. It takes a long time to get the training of a child out of him, and if it is good we do not want to get it out of him." He also reminded parents to be mindful of the moral needs of their children and to ensure that they did not begin to travel down the wrong path. "We must endeavor," he wrote, "to have our children look up a little, for they are too many to lie in idleness and dishonor. Just as sure as you see a lazy child, and his parent cannot break that child from his laziness, he is very apt to become a disgrace to his parents and to himself, and not fit for any society. So let us endeavor to keep laziness out of our children; let them be raised up honorable men and women." In Rev. Meachum's view, if free black parents did their job properly, they would "instill such principles" in their children "as could never be eradicated by time, place, or circumstance."[64]

To help instill these principles, black domestic writers by the 1840s advised readers to employ the sentimental child-rearing practices that defined middle-class domestic culture. Parents were counseled to eschew corporal punishment,

instead appealing to their children's consciences and using persuasion to nurture the development of a moral compass and teach the difference between right and wrong. Meachum thought that the best way to correct a wayward child was to discuss the matter calmly rather than "get in a passion, and in that passion correct the child too severely." And Meachum found it absolutely inappropriate for black parents—particularly mothers—to "strike" their children "over the head" or "knock them to the ground."[65] Such child-rearing techniques not only signified a move away from the patriarchal methods that had formerly held sway but also would have been a particularly pronounced departure from the type of discipline that Meachum and others might have received in their youth at the hands of slaveholders.

In addition to advocating the more gentle forms of discipline in favor in middle-class circles, black domestic writers tended to frame the free black family in deeply sentimental terms. This is especially apparent in Susan Paul's *Memoir of James Jackson, the Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months*, a celebration of the brief life of one of Paul's most promising young students. Paul intended her book to function simultaneously as a primer on conduct for young African American children and a kind of child-rearing treatise for their parents, and her descriptions of young James and his mother to serve as examples for members of the free black community. After James's father, "a respectable" man, passed away, the boy's mother was left alone to provide for several children. Deeply committed to their well-being, James's mother made sure to keep him enrolled in school, even helping him with his studies—both secular and religious—at the end of her long workday. In this way, she served as a model for those who intended to inculcate the value of antislavery living in their children and provided an example of domesticity despite the absence of the comforts that would have characterized a more economically secure middle-class home. According to Paul, young James Jackson was a near-perfect child because he listened to his mother's wisdom: "I wish," Paul wrote, "some of you who read this could see how his eyes would sparkle with pleasure, when he thought he had pleased his dear mother. I am sure you would be sorry that you had given your parents any unnecessary trouble, or spoken unkind words to them, when they desired you to do any thing for them. Your parents always know better than you do what is best for you. Although James was so very young, *he* knew this, and always cheerfully obeyed his mother's commands." She advised her young readers to remember that "the great God can see you and hear you always."

And she highlighted "four words" that she urged them to "treasure up in your memory, and frequently repeat to yourselves, when wicked children would lead you into temptation; the words are *Thou God seest me*." Paul hoped the book would "prompt parents and teachers to store the minds of the children committed to them with religious truth." If they could succeed in this endeavor, she was certain that "God will give you a large reward; yea, a hundred fold. In this life, you shall see your children coming up to be respected in society, and in the world to come, they shall be acknowledged by our Lord as heirs to life eternal."[66]

As Paul's book suggests, black conduct writers argued that the process of creating ideal black children depended on the sound education and morality of African American parents, many of whom would be the primary role models for children required to work rather than attend school.[67] Like white conduct writers, black conduct writers repeatedly reminded parents that children were largely imitative creatures.[68] "Children do little," proclaimed a passage from *Dwight's Theology* reprinted in an 1827 issue of *Freedom's Journal*, "besides imitating others." Consequently, parents needed to provide the best examples within the home. African American readers of *Freedom's Journal* would have learned that "the moral branches of Education can never be successfully taught without the aid of example," and "example has, in a great measure, the same influence upon every part of education." Therefore, failure to provide the best examples would undoubtedly lead to poorly behaved children. "Parents who read, will have reading children. Industrious parents will have industrious children. Lying parents will have lying children."[69] Rev. Meachum advised free black parents to keep in mind that they should "never allow the child to tell you a lie" and remember the power of their example: "If you promise [your children] any thing," you must "keep your word."[70] Maria Stewart agreed: "You must be careful that you set an example worthy of following, for you they will imitate." And she declared that "there are many instances, even among us now, where parents have discharged their duty faithfully, and their children now reflect honor upon their gray hairs."[71]

With the next generation in mind, African American writers, activists, and public speakers urged their audience to attend to personal morality and education precisely for the sake of their children. Still cautioned wives and mothers to safeguard their piety, morality, and virtue, for "if unhappily she should be . . . loud, clamorous, her feet wandering from the path of virtue, neglecting to rule her family, then indeed is the demoralizing effort of a bad influence felt in all avenues of her life."[72] In a letter advocating increased access to education

for free black women, one woman informed readers of the *Liberator* "that the offspring of ignorant parents are generally vicious," for when proper "advice or instruction" is not provided in the family circle, and when "inattention and unpardonable carelessness" rule the day, a child "is suffered to run the whole course of vice, until he becomes an outcast from society."[73] And some writers perceived a slippery slope from societal outcast to an early grave. During the National Black Convention of 1833, the Committee on Temperance called for all free blacks to practice "intire abstinence" or face severe consequences. "Those children in tatters, who are cruelly permitted to waste those precious hours, which should be employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who are shivering with cold, or crying for a morsel of bread, are the children of *intemperate parents. These impoverished families, these premature graves*, are the production of strong drink."[74] These charges to safeguard parental morality were not unusual in the period. As historian Mary Ryan points out, concerns about perceived parental moral lapses, particularly alcohol consumption, reflected larger middle-class anxieties about the liminality of their position.[75] But black conduct writers' insistence that personal behavior had antislavery implications suggests that these authors also interpreted success or failure in child rearing in larger, race-specific, and deeply political terms.

These larger concerns remained central to the child-rearing advice in Meachum's 1846 *Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States*. First, Meachum characterized child rearing as one of the key privileges and duties of freedom. "In times past," he wrote, "your fathers were deprived of [freedom], and of course they could not be charged with not raising their children in the right manner; that is, if they did all they could according to their situation. But as you are free, (thanks be to God for it,) the guilt comes on your head." He urged free black parents to "train up your children in the way they should go" for the good of not simply the family but also the entire "young race." Foremost among these obligations was attending to children's education, a task that Meachum saw as essential for the development of racial unity. Concerned about the low rates of schooling for African American children in the North, Meachum asked, "Look at the young and rising generation. See the great mass of them growing up without education. What is the reason of this?" Although Meachum was clearly aware of the structural barriers to education African American children faced—he would later circumvent Missouri's ban on educating black children by holding classes on a steamboat in the middle of the Mississippi River—he also blamed what he perceived as a low interest in education on a lack of racial

pride and unity. Answering, "because the fathers are not united, and the children growing up without union to the great body of their fellow beings of the same color," Meachum despaired, "The mother hath not taught it to the child, and he has nothing to rouse his mind to action." With that in mind, the reverend directed his readers to take Proverbs 22:6 ("Train up a child in the way he should go") "in consideration now and wake up the minds of our children." Meachum then personalized the proverb for the race, reminding his readers, "We are bound by the law of God and man, and our good sense, to train up *our children* in the way they shall go when young, that when they grow old they should not depart from it." As far as Meachum was concerned, racial unity was of primary importance to this agenda: "Union is the strong cord that binds nations together. Then let the mother teach it to the child, and let the father not forget that he is accountable before God for the raising of his children."[76]

By slipping so easily between race and nation, antebellum free blacks such as Meachum created the archetype of what would later be known as a "race home": a politically oriented African American family whose health, prosperity, production, and reproduction functioned both as a metaphor for and a building block of the race. Just as John Adams had argued that the nation's moral foundation rested on its families, Delany proclaimed, "Nations are but great families," and as "it is with families, so it is with nations." He continued, "Each citizen of a nation should bear the same resemblance to the great leading traits which mark the enterprise of that people, as the individual members do to the family to which they belong."[77] As a piece on child rearing published in *Freedom's Journal* concluded, "Patriotism, as well as charity, begins at home."[78] Thus, parents were charged with creating models of virtuous and independent black families, and raising ideal children. Insisting that free black parents needed to provide their children with a key set of skills while impressing on them a sense of "responsibility of race," black conduct writers informed their readers that African American parents bore responsibility for raising children who would be a credit not just to their parents but to the entire race.[79] Like their parents, exemplary children would serve as living refutations of proslavery doctrine. While touring African American communities as a correspondent for the *North Star* in 1848, Delany did not shy away from framing his praise of the children of his Carlisle, Pennsylvania, host, the Reverend W. Webb, in terms of a competition with white Americans: "The children of the family are intelligent and interesting in a high degree, and will challenge comparison with, and might well put to blush, those of their Anglo-Saxon neighbors for good behavior."[80] Given the

high stakes of this competition, parents were called on to teach their children to embrace the forms of respectability and spirit of racial unity characterized as essential for living an antislavery life. In the process, these authors implied that the health and future progress of the race rested on successful parental adherence to middle-class child-rearing practices.

TOWARD A BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS DOMESTIC IDEAL

African American writers offered a wealth of domestic advice for aspiring free blacks in the decades preceding the Civil War. They instructed young men and women to choose appropriate partners, to create ideal homes and families, and to fulfill the gender-specific duties expected of members of well-ordered, virtuous, and independent households. The model homes and families celebrated in black domestic discourse certainly differed dramatically from the domestic conditions experienced by the vast majority of free African Americans as well as the millions of enslaved African Americans. But the domestic discourse circulating in African American print culture was not meant to accurately reflect current domestic conditions. Like personal conduct discourse, domestic advice was intended to offer guidance about how to remake one's family into an institution that was the antithesis of slavery and thus a vehicle for engaging in the most personal of antislavery politics.

The link between antislavery living and the emergence of an African American domestic ideal is illustrated in an 1832 vignette on "Family Worship" published in the *Liberator*. The piece was written by Sarah Mapps Douglass, an unmarried twenty-six-year-old African American schoolteacher living in Philadelphia. Douglass used the essay to paint a sentimental family tableau that bears a close resemblance to the final scenes of Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. The piece invited readers to imagine themselves gazing unobserved on a family gathered together for morning prayers. Looking past the honeysuckle vine, "through the open window into the cottage," readers/viewers would see the mother reading "from the book of books," the father offering a "humble prayer," and the "meek and loving" children seated near their parents. Although the family was not entirely at peace—"their eldest son is absent," having "strayed from the fold"—the quiet family moment was characterized as nothing less than a domestic ideal for the free black population. Douglass praised the members of her fictional family for their "humble, unostentatious piety" and urged "all the families of our people" to follow this lead. And she concluded by

inviting respectable readers to "lift the latch" and "enter the abode," joining this domestic scene.[81]

As Douglass's piece suggests, the personal politics involved in living an antislavery life required more than individual acts; rather, they demanded a family commitment. In this brief scene, Douglass captured the many tropes embedded in the conduct discourse that taught aspiring free blacks how and why to place their domestic and family lives in the service of the antislavery struggle. Douglass took great pains to locate the family in a setting that symbolized virtue and independence, placing her characters in a "cottage," rural architecture that distances them from the urban environment. The cottage also signifies a middling economic status for the family, for like their piety, the Lindsey home is "unostentatious" and "humble" rather than decadent and opulent. Douglass even drapes the home in a honeysuckle vine, drawing on the biblical trope of the vine and fig tree, a phrase that enjoyed some popularity in the late eighteenth century and was regularly invoked during discussions of independence by men including George Washington and Richard Allen, founder of Philadelphia's Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Moreover, by having the parents lead their children in the ritual of family prayer, Douglass clearly suggests that families who regularly assembled together to pray were engaging in a practice with ramifications that extended far beyond their cottage and their individual spiritual well-being. Indeed, Douglass argued that despite the private domestic setting, these personal family moments were crucial spaces for the project of living an antislavery life. "O lady, would that we might see all the families of our people so engaged!" she wrote, "how would the sunshine of such an example disperse the mists of prejudice which surround us! Yes, religion and education would raise us to an equality with the fairest in our land." Finally, as far as Douglass was concerned, these parents would be instilling the principles that would keep their children on the path of respectability so crucial to free black middle-class forms of personal politics. In fact, Douglass assured her readers that the "wayward son" would soon remember the hours spent in prayer with his family and return home, "kneeling again at his parent's knees," receiving "their blessing as he was wont to do when a happy and sinless child."[82]

Such vignettes suggested that men and women could embody their resistance to the peculiar institution by claiming their roles as ideal mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. From this perspective, the economic partnerships involved in companionate marriage could help young men become independent self-made men. Female influence could be turned

toward protecting the morality of vulnerable young men and creating a domestic space that served as a bulwark against the racism of the outside world. And attention to proper child-rearing techniques would serve as a means to build a new generation committed to working for the good of the race. Such behavior may have done little directly to challenge the expansion of southern slavery and the growth of national racism, but its value lay in the psychological power it gave to free men and women, reminding them daily that they were not enslaved and were therefore duty-bound to place their lives in the service of the antislavery struggle. By creating a body of domestic discourse, writers and editors advocated another way for elite and aspiring African Americans to engage privately in personal politics, away from the gaze of white observers. Moreover, by placing that personal politics at the center of a black middle-class domestic ideal, African American domestic discourse suggested that antislavery living could be a family and thus collective enterprise as well as an individual one.

Yale University Press

Chapter Title: Writing for Womanhood: African American Women and Print Culture

Book Title: A Fragile Freedom
Book Subtitle: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City
Book Author(s): ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR
Published by: Yale University Press. (2008)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq0q9.10

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Yale University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *A Fragile Freedom*

5

Writing for Womanhood
African American Women and Print Culture

Print culture became a new and important vehicle in the fight to end slavery and in the development of free black communities throughout the North. The advent of black antislavery and religious newspapers such as the *Freedom's Journal*, the *Liberator*, the *North Star*, and a host of other periodicals gave African American reformers access to public forums of debate. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century a generation of free African Americans had been formally educated and were prepared to fight slavery and inequality on both the local and national levels. Published writings helped to move local Philadelphians into the national spotlight.

African American women found public writing to be most useful in their reform efforts and a wonderful opportunity to address the specific concerns and problems they experienced. A formal education and membership in elite literary societies bolstered African American participation in the national political arena. Most periodicals confined women's writings to editorials and the "poets' corner." But their contributions provide meaningful examples of antebellum political writing.[1] Often the black elite, including women, found their writings used by white and black antislavery agitators as shining examples of accomplishment and respectability.

Black women found themselves liberated and confined by the print world. While it supplied a forum for political debate, the nineteenth-century newspaper

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

defined "woman's sphere" as inherently domestic, warning African American women that "a woman who would attempt to thunder with her tongue, would not find her eloquence to increase her domestic happiness."[2] Directed to be both silent creatures of virtue and active in building and improving the free black community, African American women navigated the tricky confines of domesticity, womanhood, and virtue while simultaneously becoming very public figures.

The antebellum newspaper was not the only arena in which African American women publicly expressed their political and private sentiments. Several women wrote about their experiences in the pages of spiritual autobiographies. Although the institution of southern slavery and its stubborn northern vestiges were major themes in the writings of black women, they were not the only issues addressed. Religion and religious reform provided additional fodder. During the Second Great Awakening, African American women in Philadelphia such as Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw used the genre of the spiritual autobiography to persuade Christian readers to obey the word of God, live pious lives, and challenge evils, especially slavery.[3] Thus, from the educated elite represented in national newspapers to the humble, pious women of the A.M.E. Church, black women used print culture to further define themselves and their personal and political goals. When we examine both national periodicals and spiritual narratives, the worlds of the spiritual and the secular intersect.

Literary societies were among the first sociopolitical organizations formed by and for African American women. Middle-class African Americans understood the tremendous importance of educating a new generation of free black men and women, but it was just as important for the black elite to improve themselves and prepare for the integrated public arena.[4] Literary societies allowed elite black women to socialize among themselves while they honed the political prose that would eventually appear in national periodicals. Within those societies, friendship and sorority met with the political. In the 1830s the generation of politically charged African American women who would play such an important role in abolition had indeed emerged from the arena of the literary society. The working poor and those of the "lower sort," however, were mostly absent. It would take decades for impoverished and undereducated black women to create a political voice for themselves.

As we have seen, presentation and public image became extremely important. The ability to present oneself in a respectable manner was practiced and perfected in the literary society. Mandatory public speaking and

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

recitation were helpful to all, but especially to women unaccustomed to formal speaking. With a standard education, leadership skills, and a developed ease in public, African American women approached the middle decades of the nineteenth century with a new sense of self-confidence and social activism.

For most men and women in the early nineteenth century, education was a luxury. Before that time, elite women, both white and black, were often tutored at home and did not attend formal institutions of learning. For African Americans, whether they were ex-slaves or had never known slavery, education became an immediate goal. In 1822 Philadelphia began to offer public schooling to its black residents; universal public education had been made available to white children only four years earlier. Several racially segregated public schools opened their doors, but attendance among African American school-aged children remained low and inconsistent. The Bird School, later renamed the James Forten School, was the first public institution opened for blacks; a second segregated school opened its doors in 1830. In 1833 the Coates Street School, later renamed the Vaux School, began instructing African Americans, and several others followed suit during the ensuing years.[5] These schools were scattered across the city, allowing children who lived in the all-black Seventh Ward and beyond the opportunity for formal instruction. According to data compiled by W. E. B. Du Bois, who conducted a study in 1899 that resulted in the acclaimed *Philadelphia Negro,* there were twenty-five schools for African American children operating by 1838. Of these, only nine were free, and three additional schools were classified as "partly free."[6] Private schools remained an option for those blacks wealthy enough to afford the costly tuition. The remaining thirteen black schools were private. Of these, ten schools hired only black instructors.[7]

Although the number of black schools continued to increase throughout the antebellum years, attendance remained low. In 1838 approximately three thousand black school-aged children lived in the city, but only seventeen hundred were enrolled in school. Ten years later the population of school-aged children had increased to more than forty-five hundred, but only fifty-six additional students attended school.[8] This drastic decline in the rate of school attendance by black children was directly connected to the 1838 depression and the mounting racial tension following the violent attack on antislavery activists at Pennsylvania Hall.[9] The economic decline impinged on Philadelphia's residents, forcing many children to leave school in order to contribute to their household income.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Despite the problems of formal education, African American literacy rates increased as access widened, not only among children, but among adults as well. Older adults who had been enslaved became the subjects for new philanthropic attempts. Night schools were created by black institutions to serve African American adults who worked during the day. Several night schools remained open throughout the antebellum period, and most were supported and staffed by black church members. For black Philadelphians, formal instruction signified freedom and a great accomplishment. As late as 1856, a large proportion of African American residents remained uneducated: 45 percent of the black population was illiterate.[10] Only a small percentage of African American Philadelphians could read and write, and even fewer demonstrated the ability to "read, write and cipher."[11] For most blacks, education was tied directly to Philadelphia churches' night schools and Sunday schools.

In 1813 the city of Philadelphia counted six black churches: St. Thomas Episcopal, Mother Bethel A.M.E., Zoar Methodist Episcopal, Union A.M.E., Baptist Race and Vine Streets, and the Presbyterian Church. Just over two thousand men and women frequented these churches; approximately 50 percent attended Mother Bethel.[12]

Unlike St. Thomas, which was attended by many of Philadelphia's black elite, Mother Bethel had a congregation comprising, for the most part, poor, working African Americans. Domestics and manual laborers felt more at ease with the relaxed style of preaching associated with the Methodist denomination, and although Mother Bethel advocated formal education for its congregants, the church remained sensitive to the limitations and barriers to literacy faced by many black men and women.

The emotional nature of church services in the Methodist denomination attracted many of the city's recent southern migrants, who were accustomed to this specific style of preaching. During the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s–30s, Christian evangelicalism dominated almost every aspect of life. The North, in particular, saw a tremendous rise in the number of African Americans who belonged to a Methodist denomination, in particular the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The emotional conversion process connected to Methodism attracted black men and women who had previously been uncomfortable with other denominations that relied heavily on literacy.[13] The majority of Philadelphia's black elite found themselves attracted to churches such as St. Thomas, or to denominations such as Presbyterianism or the Society of Friends, in which "the message" was articulated in a more refined or even silent manner, but Mother Bethel and a handful of other black

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Colored Scholars Excluded from Schools. From American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Almanac* (New York, 1838). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

churches adopted the stewardship of educating African American men and women, regardless of economic status.

The Literary Society

Churches were not the only institutions to promote formal education for African Americans. Literary societies arose in Philadelphia and across the Northeast. Barred from white literary organizations, a group of free black men came together on March 20, 1828, to organize a society that would promote the "mental improvement of the people of color in the neighborhood of Philadelphia."[14] Prominent black men of the city gathered that night and listened to an address delivered by William Whipper, a wealthy black Pennsylvanian. Whipper urged his audience not to "sit as idle spectators to the movement being carried on by nations to improve themselves." He added that black men should "feel bound to open an institution to which they may repair and qualify themselves for future usefulness."[15] Whipper's speech marked the founding of the Reading Room Society for young men in Philadelphia.

Many of the early societies expressed similar reasons for their organization: the stimulation of reading and the "spreading of useful knowledge." By providing libraries and reading rooms for black residents throughout the city, the black elite continued to emphasize education.[16] These literary societies constructed spaces for literary improvement and cultivated a generation of public orators and abolitionist politicians.

In 1831 African American women in Philadelphia formed the Female Literary Society of Philadelphia. A year later the society consisted of approximately twenty members, who congregated every Tuesday night for the purpose of "mental improvement." William Lloyd Garrison addressed the society that year, reporting in his newspaper, "if the traducers of the Negro race could be acquainted with the moral worth, just refinement, and large intelligence of this association, their mouths would be hereafter dumb."[17] Thus, literary societies and abolition were linked from the very beginning.

Between 1828 and 1841, nine literary societies appeared; at least three were women's. The Minerva Literary Association, formed in 1834 with thirty members, was typical; it organized a "school for the promotion of polite literature." Programs featured readings and recitations of original and selected published pieces, along with "other appropriate matters."[18]

The African American literary society appeared at a time when social graces and customs were extremely important to the black elite. The interracial abolitionist circles created an added incentive. As the black elite began

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

their social and political networking among white Philadelphians through the politics of abolition, the literary society prepared and reinforced "the promotion of the polite."[19]

But respectability was not the only goal. The societies also served as examples for a reform-minded free community. In an 1837 address to the American Moral Reform Society, James Forten touched on this aspect of communal pride in the female literary societies. The diffusion of knowledge through reading and writing, he affirmed, reflected honorably on the community. The greater purpose, though, was to accomplish an intellectual and moral reformation.[20] Forten's comments stressed the societies' social importance. These were not just small book clubs; they were the bedrock of a social reformation.

In 1841 members of the African American elite moved beyond single-sex literary societies and organized the Gilbert Lyceum for "literary and scientific purposes." Lyceum groups of the antebellum era were concerned with the dissemination of information on the arts, sciences, and public affairs and became a powerful force in adult education and social reform. Members of the black elite such as Robert Douglass Jr., Joseph Cassey, John Bowers, Robert Purvis, Harriet Purvis, and Sarah Mapps Douglass, all well known for their ardent abolitionist sentiments, were among those listed as members of the Gilbert Lyceum. By the end of the year there were more than forty registered members of the society.[21]

African American literary clubs appeared first in Philadelphia, but the movement spread to cities such as New York, Boston, and Baltimore, and eventually to Albany, Rochester, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh.[22] All of them, with the exception of the New York African Clarkson Society, were founded during the 1830s and 1840s.[23] Like the Philadelphia societies, the literary associations in cities such as New York and Baltimore encouraged the extension of education and moral reform and the promotion of the abolition of slavery.

The Printed Word: Black Women's Public Writings in Antebellum Philadelphia

Armed with a formal education, a generation of elite black activists continued to push for immediate emancipation. Racial hostility and violence directed toward free blacks became much more pronounced during the 1830s, and as the news of a major slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, reached Philadelphia in August 1831, white Pennsylvanians feared a change in the demographics of the state. Free blacks in Virginia would

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

most certainly be forced to relocate following the bloody Nat Turner rebellion, and many white Philadelphians expected that they would move north, settling within the city limits. Rumors that as many as five hundred southern freedmen had settled in the city in just two months during 1831 unnerved many white Philadelphians. Free blacks were blamed not only for inciting slave rebellions but also for luring fugitives to the urban cities of the North, elevating crime and poverty in the city streets.[24]

White Philadelphians began to petition the state legislature to enact restrictive laws. The proposed law of 1831 prohibited "ignorant, indolent, and depraved" free blacks from entering the state of Pennsylvania. The bill also attempted to regulate the lives of free blacks born in Pennsylvania. Local officials were to take a census of all blacks in their townships, noting the name, sex, age, and complexion of each person. Any African American man or woman attempting to move from one county to another would be forced to present proof of residency in the state.[25]

As the black abolitionists James Forten, Robert Purvis, and William Whipper drew up a memorial to be presented to the state legislature, the bill was lost in committee and never came to a final vote.[26] The derailment of the bill, however, was of no importance to the African American community, specifically the elite. The fact that such legislation could even be contemplated was threatening and spoke to the racial hostility of the 1830s. The next several decades proved more inhospitable and, in many cases, violent for black Philadelphians. As the country moved deeper and deeper into crisis, African Americans in northern cities became preoccupied with the status of their own freedom while southern slaveholders held on tightly to their property—even as the institution of slavery continued to expand across the country. Black Philadelphians remained steadfast in their efforts to abolish slavery and were perhaps more acutely aware of the fragility of their social status.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 presented itself as one of the most troublesome measures passed by Congress, creating a storm of protest and fear among free black northerners. It was this law perhaps above all others that reminded free black northerners of their vulnerability. As the kidnapping of free blacks during the 1830s and 1840s prompted black men and women to live life cautiously, the Fugitive Slave Law heightened all fears, for it placed in even greater peril the lives of free blacks. Four years later Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The act opened the Northwest to slave trading and appeared to validate the expansion of slavery. For those who had assumed that slavery would eventually fade away, this act reinforced the fact that the institution of slavery would not simply disappear. In 1857 the Supreme Court handed down the Dred

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Scott decision, which denied citizenship not only to enslaved black men and women but to all African Americans across the country.[27]

For black women in Philadelphia during this time, the struggle for abolition and the combating of racial stereotypes reinforced by newspaper articles and vicious cartoons, such as the "Life in Philadelphia" series, became an important and time-consuming process.[28] As they continued to work in mutual aid associations, antislavery societies, and benevolent organizations, black women also used the printed word as a form of agency, demonstrating their freedom and respectability. The interracial Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society was not the only mechanism for social change and activism. African American women began to write for the protection of their womanhood and for freedom.

African American women used the black press and other public print forums to describe their life experiences and to create an imagery of African Americans in Philadelphia. Their opinions regarding motherhood, antislavery, and freedom appeared in local and national newspapers, as they took their private concerns and political debates to the public forum of the printed word. The *Liberator,* the *North Star,* and the *Pennsylvania Freeman* were but a few of the newspapers to which black women contributed poetry, short stories, and essays that expressed their feelings and their own experiences.

Challenging the contemporary codes of appropriate behavior for women through the act of public writing, black women often found themselves defending their right to self-expression. The simple act of writing challenged existing stereotypes regarding women's supposed intellectual inferiority in both African American and white political circles.

Sarah Forten, Margaretta Forten and Sarah Mapps Douglass all wrote in the spirit of protest. Others, such as Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Frances Harper, both of whom had strong ties to Philadelphia, joined the small cadre of writers. Although race prejudice made it difficult to publish, the abolitionist movement produced new contacts and avenues by which to have their works published. Prominent white female and male abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child and William Lloyd Garrison assisted black women by publishing their poetry and essays in pamphlets and newspapers.[29]

Perhaps the earliest political writings by women appeared in the form of the petition.[30] Petition writing became a very popular method of political involvement for both white and black women during the antebellum era. Although many male reformers considered women's participation in petition-writing campaigns to be inappropriate, some abolitionists argued that the influence of women would help to purify the nation. Those who supported women's involvement in letter and petition writing viewed their activities as a

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

continuation of patriotic traditions created during the American Revolution. Antislavery societies granted black women the first opportunity to participate in this early form of political writing, and during the early 1830s the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society sent several petitions both to the state legislature and to Congress demanding the termination of slavery.[31]

As black women began to diversify their political writings, moving from group petition writing to individual essays and poems, they stood as examples of educational progress and activism. Praised for their eloquent prose and sentimental poetry, black women political writers were often viewed as uplifters of their race. In his preface to a collection of Frances Harper's poetry, William Lloyd Garrison stated that her work stood as an example of progress, as it represented "intelligence, talent, genius, and piety." According to Garrison, Harper's representation of free black America would only "deepen the interest already so extensively felt in the liberation and enfranchisement of the entire colored race."[32]

Among the best-known newspaper contributors was Sarah Louise Forten, the daughter of James and Charlotte Forten and a leading member of the PFASS. Known by her pen names "Ada" and "Magawisca," Sarah Forten contributed over a dozen poems and essays to several different newspapers between 1831 and 1837.[33] Her poem "The Grave of the Slave" was set to music by the black bandleader Frank Johnson and was often sung at antislavery meetings. Frequently appearing in the poets' corner of antislavery newspapers, Forten stressed the hypocrisy of slavery while exhibiting her own writing talents. Forten's demonstration of her sophisticated education through her writings was another way to combat the racial hostility and white supremacist attitudes of the 1830s.

One of Forten's first published essays appeared in the *Liberator* in 1831, just as Garrison was beginning his venture. "The Abuse of Liberty" supplied a poignant discussion about the evils of slavery and its effect on the African in America: "I know no evil under the wide-spread canopy of Heaven, so great as the abuse of man's liberty; and no where has this vice a more extensive sway, than in the boasted land of Philanthropy, that offers to every white man the right to enjoy life, liberty and happiness. I say every white man, because those who cannot show a fair exterior, (no matter what be the noble qualities of the mind,) are to be robbed of the rights by which they were endowed by an all-wise and merciful Creator, who in his great wisdom, cast a sable hue over some of the 'lord's creation.'"[34] Denouncing the white slave master, Forten lamented the well-known horrors of slavery, beginning with the separation of family: "It is a lamentable fact that they [slave masters] can with remorseless hearts rush like fiends into the retirement of a happy

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

unsuspecting family, and with unshaken hand tear the unconscious husband from his tender wife, and the helpless babe from its mother's breast."[35] She concluded her essay with a threat of unrest and rebellion, not merely from the slaves themselves, but, more important, from God, who, according to Forten, would eventually right the wrongs of slavery. Although her entry appeared some five months before the 1831 Southampton massacre, Americans, especially southern slave owners, worried about slave rebellion and violence. Forten's prophecy of violence would have resonated in the minds of many people. "He [God] is just, and his anger will not always slumber. He will wipe the tear from Ethiopia's eye; He will shake the tree of liberty, and its blossoms shall spread over the earth."[36]

A few weeks later Forten's "The Slave" appeared in the *Liberator.* It was a scathing criticism of slavery in the United States. She dwelled on the incompatibility of the war for independence with the enslavement of Africans:

> Our Sires who once in freedom's cause,
> Their boasted freedom sought and won,
> For deeds of glory gained applause,
> When patriot feelings led them on.
>
> And can their sons now speak with pride,
> Of rights for which they bled and died,
> Or while the captive is oppressed,
> Think of the wrongs they once regressed?[37]

Forten charged white America with obliterating the memories of the liberty and freedom for which the revolutionaries fought and now refused to the slave:

> Oh, surely they have quite forgot,
> That bondage once had been their lot;
> The sweets of freedom now they know,
> They care not for the captives wo.[38]

Forten contributed to several different newspapers in the 1830s, but much of her work appeared in the *Liberator.* Sarah Mapps Douglass, also known as "Zillah, a young lady of color," was another of Garrison's interests. Douglass contributed political essays addressing such issues as colonization, emancipation, and local Philadelphia issues. In 1832 Douglass wrote a letter to the editor of the *Liberator* about the Pennsylvania legislature's attempt to prohibit the migration of blacks to the state. Douglass connected the legislature's attempt at restriction to the growing racial hostility and social inequality experienced by all of Pennsylvania's citizens: "You ask me if I do not despair on account of the Bill now before our Legislature? I am cast

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

down, but not in despair. I am aware that it will be our lot to suffer much persecution, and I have endeavored, for the last year, to fortify my mind against approaching trials."[39]

Like all black writers, Douglass was uneasy and angry about the heightened racism of the era. In her writings, however, were also expressions of hope for the future of race relations. She noted America's possibilities: "I see black and white mingle together in societal intercourse, without a shadow of disgust appearing on the countenance of either; no wailing heard, nor clanking chains, but the voice of peace and love and joy is wafted to my ears."[40] In another 1832 letter to the *Liberator,* she confronted the very serious debate regarding colonization among free blacks throughout the country. As this debate, which concerned the relocation of black Americans to Africa and Haiti, became a central political discussion in Philadelphia, Douglass expressed her resistance. She denounced colonization and reinforced a commitment and a desire on behalf of black Americans to maintain their residency in the United States: "Believe me, my friend, there is no spot in the known world where people are happier than in America. And bethink thee, dearest, it is our home. Think of this for one moment, and memory will call up so many fond and soothing reflections as will make thee loath to leave it."[41] Douglass's writings expressed gratitude for the principles on which America was founded, but her concerns regarding the social inequalities faced by enslaved and free black Americans were always central.

As the first black female newspaper editor, Mary Ann Shadd Cary created the *Provincial Freeman* (1853–57). Cary received tremendous praise from white abolitionist circles and free black communities for creating a political vehicle for the expression of black male and female voices. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1823 to Harriet and Abraham Shadd, she was the oldest of thirteen children. It was a close-knit family of political activists; her father was a delegate to the annual Conventions of Free People of Color and served as the convention president in 1833.[42]

The Shadd family moved to the outskirts of Philadelphia and settled in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Abraham Shadd prospered with his boot and shoe store, and he was rumored to have served as a station on Philadelphia's Underground Railroad.[43] Having attended grammar school in Wilmington, Mary Ann Shadd completed her schooling in a private Quaker school just outside the city's limits.

Cary began her career, as did many other middle-class black abolitionists, as a teacher—first in Wilmington, Delaware, at the age of sixteen, and then in Pennsylvania. Throughout the 1840s she moved from one black school to another up and down the Northeast, spending a great deal of time in New

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Jersey and New York. As she joined black abolitionist circles from Delaware to New York, Cary began to create a reputation as an activist herself.

In 1854 Cary became an editor of the *Provincial Freeman,* an antislavery newspaper in Ontario, Canada. Writing some twenty years after Sarah Forten, Cary had greater opportunity to address a wider range of issues than had her female predecessors. She used the newspaper as a vehicle to explore important questions that often divided black abolitionists of the 1850s.[44] With the woman suffrage movement under way and a greater acceptance of women as writers and public speakers, Cary could write and speak more freely, often condemning the paternalism of white abolitionism as well as assimilationist ideas promoted by many white men and women involved in the antislavery campaign. In one scathing editorial, Cary attacked "the disposition to make black appear white," and the desire to force "white standards" on blacks as the remedy for hostile race relations throughout the country. According to Cary, the adoption or assimilation of these standards stripped "the mis-called free colored man of all rights."[45]

Cary joined other black leaders who urged for migration to Canada, the West Indies, or Africa. Cary had lived in Canada for only a few months when she joined the migrationists, and her bold words and vehement stance regarding the emigration of black men and women to Canada often marginalized her within the black abolitionist community. Although she was respected by many, her abilities and her assertiveness often antagonized potential supporters and colleagues. As she attempted to move beyond the barriers of gender by participating in political forums, men, both black and white, often opposed her. In 1855 Cary traveled back to Philadelphia to attend the eleventh Colored National Convention, where she hoped to address all those present. No woman had ever been permitted to address the convention, and according to Frederick Douglass's newspaper, there was a great deal of discussion concerning Cary's participation: "There was much opposition manifested to her admission, on the part of some members, among them a rough, uncouth, semi-barbarous fellow who wished to know if 'we would admit Abby Kelley also?'" Although Cary was finally permitted to address the convention, her words were not well received. Her enthusiasm regarding emigration to Canada received little attention, for the majority of convention members were unhappy with having one of "the unfortunate sex" as their spokesperson.[46]

Like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper made a career for herself as a teacher, writer, and antislavery activist. Born in Baltimore in 1825, Harper was orphaned at an early age and raised by her aunt and uncle. As a free person in Baltimore, she attended her uncle's school until the age of thirteen, when she was forced to find employment as a servant in

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

order to contribute to the family income. Her financial responsibility to her family temporarily superseded her educational goals, as was the case with many black men and women from modest households. As a seamstress and nurse for a white family in Baltimore, Harper still found time to cultivate her literary skills. Her employer, a bookseller, permitted her to read from his extensive library during her free time.[47]

As conditions for free blacks in Maryland began to deteriorate after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Harper and her family left Baltimore and relocated in Ohio. Her educational background allowed her to move from domestic servant to respected educator when, at the age of twenty-six, Harper began her career as a schoolteacher there. As the first female teacher at the small school, Harper faced a great deal of resistance from male faculty members; she eventually moved back to the East Coast, to the outskirts of Philadelphia in York, Pennsylvania. There Harper continued in her struggle to uplift her race. Her statement that "the condition of our people, the wants of our children, and the welfare of our race, demand the aid of every helping hand" gave Harper the added incentive and needed strength to continue her teaching.[48]

Harper understood that her education allowed her to make the transition from domestic servitude. Unlike many other black female schoolteachers, however, Harper openly discussed the difficulties involved in teaching large numbers of uneducated black children with very few supplies. Black women who were given the opportunity to work outside the realm of domestic service were considered fortunate, and they were not often afforded the opportunity to discuss their occupational difficulties. For Harper, teaching became burdensome and an undesirable occupation. Limited because of her race and gender, she had few other opportunities, and she wrote to her friend William Still asking for his advice: "What would you do if you were in my place? Would you give up and go back to work at your trade [dressmaking]? There are no people that need all of the benefits resulting from a well-directed education more than we do. . . . It is a work of time, a labor of patience, to become an effective school teacher; and it should be a work of love in which they who engage should not abate heart or hope until it is done."[49]

It appeared to many black female teachers that their hard work was at times unnoticed. Compared to the backbreaking work of domestic labor, teaching was often considered somewhat luxurious. Only a few black women publicly expressed the difficulties of teaching. In 1832 Sarah Mapps Douglass wrote an essay in the *Liberator* in which she not only discussed the arduous work of the schoolteacher but also asked black schoolchildren to heed their instructors: "I hope the children who may read this tale, are very

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

gentle and obedient to their teachers, because a teacher has many difficulties to encounter, and the good or bad conduct of children greatly increases or lessens difficulties."[50] Douglass ended her essay with the following: "I think, dear children, from what I have written, that you will understand that you have it in your power always to make the situation of your teachers pleasant. Will you not do so?"[51]

Having served as a teacher for many years, Harper nevertheless found a classroom of fifty-three children too much to handle. Her exposure to a community of free black abolitionists provided an entryway into a new career as an activist. Her transition to full-time antislavery agitator and writer allowed Harper to uplift her race in a different way; she concluded that "it may be that God himself has written upon both my heart and brain a commission to use time, talent and energy in the cause of freedom."[52] For the next few decades, Harper continued in the movement, lecturing throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic states; she supported herself through the sales of her poetry and books.

Harper lectured on many different topics during her antislavery tours, although her comments targeted the slave South and in particular the treatment of the enslaved woman and the dismantling of families. The North, however, was not spared from Harper's scathing commentary regarding race relations. In a letter written in 1858 she discussed the hazards faced by many black men and women, specifically those in Pennsylvania. "Now let me tell you about Pennsylvania. I have been in every New England state, in New York, Canada and Ohio, but of all these places this is about the meanest of all, as far as the treatment of colored people is concerned. . . . On the Carlisle road I was interrupted and insulted several times. Two men came after me in one day. I have met, of course, with kindness among individuals and families; all is not dark in Pennsylvania, but the shadow of slavery, oh, how drearily it hangs."[53] Harper used the platform of the press not only to express the injustice behind the institution of slavery but also to expose the problems of social inequality for black men and women in the North. Harper, Sarah Forten, Sarah Mapps Douglass, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary all used the vehicle of the press for their activism throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, adding momentum to the abolitionist movement and pushing for equal rights for African Americans throughout the country.

African American Women and the Spiritual Narrative

As women of the black elite used newspaper articles, diary entries, and personal letters to speak out against the evils of slavery, they challenged societal norms that bound women to the silent sphere of the home. The

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

African American elite, however, were not the only women to confront and alter nineteenth-century tradition, for thousands of ordinary women supported political activism through small offerings of financial assistance and through individual work in local mutual aid societies. There was an even smaller group of women who dedicated themselves to lives of religious reform. As African American female church members monitored the private lives of black Philadelphians through church tribunals, women such as Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw attempted to uplift the African American community through evangelization, spreading the Gospel to all who would hear it. Consumed with the business of saving souls, Lee and Elaw broke from traditional roles to become female itinerant preachers and religious reformers. Their spiritual narratives of the antebellum era contribute another layer to the multifaceted political writings of African American women, offering a different perspective on the public and private lives of antebellum black women.

Beginning with the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, black congregations created a unique religious culture that was based heavily on populist ideology. During the early nineteenth century, many African American men and women considered themselves qualified to preach the Gospel after experiencing conversion, discounting formal training as a necessity. It mattered not if a person was poor or uneducated, for the religious culture of black Philadelphia was much more accepting of a lay ministry.[54] A relaxed Methodist denomination allowed African American women to enter the field of private exhorting in prayer meetings and small gatherings. The black Methodist church did, however, hold to traditional gender roles, which made the advancement of women such as Lee and Elaw from the prayer group to the pulpit a difficult and often dangerous journey.

The majority of nineteenth-century African American spiritual autobiographies begin with the story of slavery. So does the *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel.* Jarena Lee, born in 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey, was separated from her parents at the age of seven when she was indentured as a servant girl some sixty miles away from her family. She endured the psychological hardships that would have afflicted any small child removed from her parents' home; she admitted to depression and fleeting thoughts of suicide. In 1849 a conversion experience intervened during an episode of emotional anguish. Lee credited it as saving her life both spiritually and physically: "by some means, of which I can give no account, my thoughts were taken entirely from this purpose. It was the unseen arm of God which kept me from self-murder."[55]

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Lee's conversion took place during a sermon delivered by the Reverend Richard Allen and prompted her to join the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Although put off by what appeared to be the rigid rules of the Methodist Society, Lee wrote: "That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet and declare that God, for Christ's sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul. Great was the ecstasy of my mind, for I felt that not only the sin of malice was pardoned, but all other sins were swept away together."[56] Lee's renewed commitment to religion led her to follow a life that was unconventional for an African American woman: she moved from new convert to pious church member and eventually to itinerant preacher.[57]

Zilpha Elaw, born in Pennsylvania around 1790, experienced many of the same life challenges as Lee. Elaw was also separated from her parents as a young child; when she was twelve, her mother died while giving birth to her twenty-second child. Elaw was then consigned to Pierson and Rebecca Mitchel, working as an indentured servant until her eighteenth birthday.[58] Like many other black Philadelphians then, both Elaw and Lee experienced servitude and became free in the early 1800s.[59]

Elaw converted as a teenager. Finding herself completely alone, she began her first intimate conversations with God, a great help amid the difficulties of servitude and loneliness. Following her conversion, she wrote that all the hardships and unfortunate circumstances that she had experienced before her conversion vanished, allowing her rebirth with a new temper, disposition, and heart: "After this wonderful manifestation of my condescending Saviour, the peace of God which passeth understanding was communicated to my heart; and joy in the Holy Ghost, to a degree, at the least, unutterable by my tongue and indescribable by my pen; it was beyond my comprehension; but from that happy hour, my soul was set at glorious liberty; and like the Ethiopic eunuch, I went on my way rejoicing in the blooming prospects of a better inheritance with the saints in light. This, my dear reader, was the manner of my soul's conversion to God."[60]

Both Lee and Elaw continued to study the Bible and to speak at small gatherings, and eventually they began calling themselves preachers. The response to female exhorting by the members and officials of Mother Bethel was far from warm. Although they attempted to nurture the spirits of their community members, they saw these women as attacking the role of the male minister. It mattered not that they worked to spread the word of God. What mattered was their gender: women were not to preach. Although many female members of Mother Bethel led prayer groups at home and at church, few were brave enough to move beyond.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

There were, however, some who refused to scorn the women of the word. According to the autobiographical sketches written by Lee and Elaw, both women drew large crowds of black and white men and women who assembled to hear them preach or to hold prayer meetings in every city and state to which they traveled. Across the country, people journeyed long distances to hear the female preachers, and although the A.M.E. Church did not formally recognize these women, they were viewed by many members as instruments of God, and they attained the folksy image of wandering women preachers.

Navigating between the Worlds of Womanhood and the Ministry

The majority of African American female itinerant preachers of the nineteenth century wrote extensively about religious and spiritual matters. Absent from their autobiographies is the personal experience of marriage and motherhood. Although the personal is briefly discussed in their writings, it often appears as peripheral to their lives. Both Elaw and Lee wrote about the impediments to religious work that arose from family obligations, in particular the problems of marriage. With the responsibility of raising families and the hurdles of disagreeable husbands, both women were unable to begin their preaching careers until later in their lives. Both Lee and Elaw were widowed and eventually relieved of the duty of rearing their own children.

Zilpha Elaw's memoir explores the difficulties of young women preparing to enter into marriage. In Elaw's 1846 spiritual memoir, she mentions nothing about courtship or love; she writes instead of marriage as a duty to which she had to submit. "In the year 1810, I surrendered myself in marriage to Joseph Elaw, a very respectable young man, in the general acception of the term, but he was not a Christian,—that is, a sincere and devoted disciple of Christ, though nominally bearing His name."[61]

Elaw's use of the term *surrendered* is revealing, for although it was a common way to describe the act of marriage for a woman, Elaw described her union as a failure. Constantly complaining of her husband's irreligious ways, Elaw noted its effect on her own spiritual well-being. Although she experienced conversion, the role of wife took priority over her religious calling. For single young women in servitude, marriage often provided a way by which to liberate oneself from a white master. African American women used servitude to gain access to freedom; marriage was another vehicle used to gain stability. Although authority concerning the lives of black women was transferred from employer to husband, it nevertheless allowed for a more autonomous family life, filled with possibilities.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Companionate marriages became increasingly acceptable among the elite by the middle of the nineteenth century, but the romance involved in choosing one's partner was often absent in the writings of ordinary women such as Elaw.[62] There was no mention of love or mutual admiration in her narrative; instead, she compared her marriage to a "millstone" hung about her neck. Troubled by her husband's lack of deference to religion, Elaw warned young female readers about the seriousness of marriage, especially to a nonbeliever: "Oh! let me affectionately warn my dear unmarried sisters in Christ against being thus unequally yoked with unbelievers. In general your lot would be better, if a millstone were hung about your necks, and you were drowned in the depths of the sea, than you should disobey the law of Jesus, and plunge yourselves into all the sorrows, sins, and anomalies involved in a matrimonial alliance with an unbeliever."[63] Elaw's warning hinged on the problems of marriage to a man who lacked piety, but her words represented a more general message about the institution of marriage. Her husband had been expelled from the church society; instead of denouncing him, however, Elaw found it within her heart to pity him: "I could not regard him as a backslider from religion, for I am of opinion that he had never tasted of the pardoning love of God through the atonement of Jesus Christ."[64] Joseph Elaw promised his wife that he would cleanse his soul and mend his ways by reuniting with the church, but this never happened. He moved farther away from the church and attempted to bring his wife into the "world of sin" by taking her to ballrooms and other social spaces filled with spiritual temptation. Elaw remained steady in her faith and confident that her marriage to a nonbeliever was a mistake, but divorce was an impossibility for any ordinary woman, black or white, in early nineteenth-century America.

Still, Elaw made certain to make clear to her reading public that she respected the bonds of matrimony and thought it the respectable way to form a family. Elaw tested the waters of "the marriage question" in early nineteenth-century feminism; however, she remained publicly committed to traditional ideas. Following her statement regarding the problematic nature of marriage to a nonbeliever, Elaw strategically expressed a very traditional viewpoint in which she blamed youth, foolishness, and haughtiness as the causes of troubled marriages:

> This mischief frequently emanates from the delusive sentiments in which the female portion of the Christian community is steeped. Young ladies imagine themselves their own mistresses before they are able to shift for themselves; and especially when they attain the legal maturity fixed by civil law. Pride, consequential haughtiness, and independent arrogance in females, are the worst vices of humanity, and are denounced in the Scriptures

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> as insuring the severest retributions of God. Isaiah iii. 16–24. The laws of the Scripture invest parents with the trust and control of their daughter, until the time, be it early or late in life, when the father surrenders her in marriage to the care and government of a husband: then, and not till then, the guardianship and government of her father over her ceases; and then, formed as she is by nature for subordination, she becomes the endowment and is subject to the authority of her husband.[65]

Elaw also labeled women who spoke against the wishes of their parents or their husbands as indecent, impious, and disrespecting the scriptures. Ironically, this female minister denounced independent women as unnatural, stating that "the fancied independence and self-control in which they indulge, has no foundation either in nature or Scripture, and is prolific with the worst results both to religion and society."[66] Elaw proclaimed that a father should be the steward of a young woman until she married, when her husband would assume a governing role. But this practice of transferring paternalistic control proved extremely problematic for women like Elaw. She was in essence an orphan and an indentured servant: who took on the authority of stewardship for young black women like her? Although white masters attempted to control many aspects of their servants' lives, they were far from acting as surrogate parents. As slavery and indentured servitude had separated families from one another, who was to pick up the mantle of governor? Many African American women took seriously the idea that they had "none but God to look to" and therefore governed themselves with the hope of divine guidance.

Jarena Lee approached the subject of marriage in a manner similar to Elaw's. Her memoir recounted an uncomfortable story of marriage to a pastor outside Philadelphia. "In the year 1811, I changed my situation in life, having married Mr. Joseph Lee, pastor of a Society at Snow Hill, about six miles from the city of Philadelphia. It became necessary therefore for me to remove."[67] Although Lee was not faced with the difficulties of marriage to a nonbeliever, she was forced to move out of the city, "a great trial at first," since she left her network of Christian friends behind. While in Snow Hill, New Jersey, Lee continued to practice her faith with diligence, but she noted that she never found in her new home state the closeness that she had experienced with her Philadelphia band of followers.

Within the course of a year, Lee attempted to persuade her husband to move back to Philadelphia. Unwilling to leave behind his congregation, Joseph Lee refused, leaving his wife with no option but to remain, unhappy, in New Jersey. Lee received a divine message while she slept that convinced her that her husband's duty was to remain: "Joseph Lee must take care of these

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

sheep, or the wolf will come and devour them."[68] She expressed her discontent in a different manner: she became ill.

Illness in the early nineteenth century plagued many people frequently and for long periods. Throughout the century, diaries and memoirs written by women depicted various health afflictions that were often of unknown cause and difficult to treat. A malady or debility forced many women to take to their beds, particularly after the birth of a child.[69] Lee's illness was never given a specific name or cure. She spiraled downward: "After this, I fell into a state of general debility, and in an ill state of health so much so, that I could not sit up. . . . From this sickness I did not expect to recover, and there was but one thing that bound me to this earth, and this was that I had not as yet preached the gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam's race to the satisfaction of my mind."[70] Neither her husband nor her two infants gave Lee the will to live. It was her desire for fellowship and her dream eventually to spread the Gospel that kept her from death. Lee remained ill for six years, a time in which five family members lost their lives, including her husband.

Lee never discussed her marriage or her husband's death in detail. She simply stated that, among the fatalities of her family members, her husband's "was the greatest affliction of all"; she was left alone with two small children, with none but "the promise of Him" to depend upon. She did note that she became an older, more mature woman. Joseph Lee's death would free her not simply from unhappiness in Snow Hill, but also from the confines of coverture and submission.[71] Lee was at last in the position to make her own decisions.

Both Elaw's marriage of thirteen years and Lee's of six ended with the deaths of men who prevented them from doing the Lord's work. Once their husbands were gone, both Elaw and Lee were free to live the lives of preacher women; widowhood had its privileges. Their unorthodox desire to preach in public often incited anger and hostility and on occasion jeopardized their physical safety. Although many African American women were accustomed to a lack of protection from violence, black women preachers were especially at risk. Traveling from city to city, alone and in strange environments, women such as Lee and Elaw had to provide for themselves, which proved particularly difficult in small towns throughout the South. Denouncing slavery as un-Christian, African American women preachers placed their lives in danger as they spread the word of God.

Although Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw have been labeled biblical feminists for their contested and sometimes dangerous stand as ministers, these two women, as well as many other African American women of the nineteenth century, found it extremely difficult to balance the demands of the private

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and the public world. In many cases, the private and public worlds of African American communities appeared to be seamless. Under the gaze of white Philadelphians, or the vigilance of independent black communities, the private world designated as "woman's sphere" at that time was in many instances open to public scrutiny. For women such as Lee and Elaw, the act of becoming a wife or mother provided additional difficulties to an already unconventional lifestyle.

Motherhood and the Ministry

Lee and Elaw were wives and mothers, yet these very personal relationships are nearly absent from their spiritual narratives. Perhaps the absence of family in the narratives of these women served as a way to protect their private lives. This, however, appears odd for nineteenth-century African Americans, since recently emancipated Philadelphians worked so hard to locate and nurture their families in the aftermath of slavery. For most, family and, in particular, motherhood represented a treasured declaration of freedom. This, however, was not declared by Elaw and Lee.

For women of the postrevolutionary era, the concepts of feminine virtue were deeply rooted to the status of motherhood.[72] For African American women, the privilege of motherhood was twofold: it allowed for a semi-autonomous role within the family, and it allowed them to participate in the shaping of a virtuous black community, as the family became extremely important as a measure of progress. Many African Americans believed that if virtuous republicanism could be displayed in the black community, then perhaps the recognition and benefits attached to citizenship would eventually be extended to them. For African American women, there was much more at stake than one's own reputation if one failed at motherhood.

In Elaw's writing, her daughter is never mentioned by name, nor is there any discussion of her or the relationship they shared. Like many widows, Elaw was unable to support her family independently. Forced to hire out both her daughter and herself, Elaw reentered the world of employment outside the home, but her illness prevented her from working steadily. As an alternative, Elaw was able to open a small school for African American students. Her previous education, most likely gained while she was an indentured servant, allowed her to move beyond the scope of domestic service, a privilege enjoyed by very few black women.[73]

Still, she was extremely unhappy, for the responsibilities of motherhood prohibited her from concentrating on the call to preach. Invited to travel to Philadelphia to preach with several other church members, Elaw found

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

herself desperately wanting to abandon her role as mother and join her brothers and sisters of the faith in their travels. Unable to arrange her affairs or collect sufficient financial support to depart with her neighbors, Elaw noted that her initial decision not to begin her career as a traveling preacher hinged on the responsibility attached to motherhood. It was only after her young daughter noticed her mother's depression that she convinced Elaw to begin her travels: "I returned home, and my little daughter seeing the tears flow from my cheeks, said to me, 'Now, mother, what is the matter?' for she was aware of the great anxiety of mind I had so long been labouring under, and said all she could to comfort me; and added, 'If I were you, I should not mind what any person said, but I should go just as I had arranged to go, and do not think anything about me, for I shall do very well.'"[74]

After receiving her daughter's permission to abandon her familial responsibilities, Elaw announced that all of her "tears were dried away" and God allowed her to take leave. Elaw put her daughter in the care of a relative, moved on to Philadelphia, and "commenced in her Master's business." The call to preach the Gospel trumped all other responsibilities. She would have relied on the charity of black mutual aid societies. Organizations like the Daughters of Allen provided assistance to women, specifically those who were ill or widowed, so that Elaw could continue her preaching. "Everyone appeared to be acquainted with my situation. I preached in a great many chapels, and every congregation voluntarily made a collection for my aid; and every person whose house I visited gave me something for my journey."[75] Thus, church members came to Elaw's aid. Often ambivalent about the role of the female preacher, they still maintained their commitment to feed, clothe, and house the needy.

Like Zilpha Elaw, Jarena Lee never mentioned the birth of her two children in her spiritual autobiography, nor did she discuss her personal relationship with them. Only after the death of her husband did Lee write that she was left alone with two infants, "one of the age of about two years, the other six months."[76] The section of her narrative following the death of her spouse is entitled "The Subject of My Call to Preach Renewed," in which she focused on her mission to preach. The Reverend Richard Allen gave approval for Lee to minister to members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church while she "kept house" with her "little son who was very sickly."[77]

Throughout the remainder of her narrative, Lee described her family as consisting of two people, herself and her son, James. The death of one of her children never appears in the text. Her son remained ill and was continually left in the care of friends and family. Although the death of her husband was discussed in brief detail, the death of the child was completely omitted. The

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

status of widowhood gained by her husband's death was necessary in the construction of her identity as a wise and older woman capable of preaching the Gospel. Yet the death of a child, rather than evoking respect or sympathy, could easily bring blame on a mother who refused to stay at home. Because of her frequent absences, Lee may very well have been held accountable for her child's death by the community to which she preached.

As for small and sickly James, he spent a great deal of time separated from his mother. Although she occasionally took him with her on missions to New Jersey and Delaware, James remained mostly in the care of friends. Employing the assistance of her mother, who lived in Cape May, New Jersey, Lee often left her son with family, even when he was seriously ill. Lee left her son in the care of friends and relatives, although her narrative states that she gave her son over to the Reverend Richard Allen for a little more than two years, making the Allens James's main caregivers. Upon returning to Philadelphia from a trip to Baltimore in 1830, Lee commented on the parental responsibility Allen had assumed for her son: "Next I left Baltimore for Philadelphia, my home, and found my friends all well; and my only son also, was well, and remained with Rev. Bishop Allen, where I left him before I went away. After being absent for two years and six months, I found Bishop Allen in very ill health, but he ever had continued on with unwearied interest in my son's welfare, by sending him to school, and otherwise improving him in education; by which he has made considerable improvements therefrom; which gave me great reconciliation of mind; one thing lacking, which was a trade."[78] In 1831 Richard Allen died, leaving behind a huge congregation and a national network of friends and followers. For Lee, not only was Allen's death sorrowful, but it also created a need for a new source of child care. Noting that she was troubled by her son's limited formal schooling and his lack of a trade, Lee placed the boy with a "French gentleman." James, then approximately fifteen years old, would begin to learn the cabinetmaking business as an apprentice.[79]

The writings of African American women, both elite and ordinary, demonstrate the difficulties of racism, sexism, motherhood, and familial obligations during the nineteenth century. As women such as the Fortens expressed these challenges in the pages of national periodicals, their focus often centered on the political issues of the era: slavery, temperance, and reform. Women such as Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, who were not members of the black elite, focused on the importance of religion and the difficulty of familial obligations. Both genres of writing allow us to see into the personal worlds and intimate difficulties of African American women: for what the writers say, and for what they do not say.

This content downloaded from 129.25.131.235 on Mon, 10 Dec 2018 18:27:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms