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Queering The Archive: Re-Examining Narratives of U.S. Chattel Slavery

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**Queering The Archive: Re-Examining Narratives of U.S. Chattel
Slavery**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2022

Abstract

Queering The Archive: Re-Examining Narratives of U.S. Chattel Slavery

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2022

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Consisting of a what I term a queer rereading of the U.S. slavery archive, this project focuses on two key concerns: one, how enslaved (and formerly enslaved) women conceived of and performed their own genders and two, how enslaved and formerly enslaved women structured their relationships to other women.

By engaging the wealth of transcripts compiled throughout the course of the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project; a diverse array of primary sources culled from multiple sites; and the records, images, and (auto)biographies of more visible figures like Cathay Williams, Ellen Craft, Harriet Tubman, and “Stagecoach” Mary Fields, this work opens up space for considering the types of stories it becomes possible to tell when the archive is approached without the base assumption of cishetermnormativity—complex stories of gender creativity and alternate trajectories. Impossible stories. Queer stories.

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Introduction

“The pieces of [the enslaved’s] conceptions of being human will have to be put together by all kinds of indirect and inventive methods since official historiography, from a hegemonic perspective, never allowed that there could be a category called subjectivity among the enslaved.”

-Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion*¹

In her meditations on Sally Hemings—who was (in)famously enslaved by Thomas Jefferson even after bearing several of his children—Kimberly Juanita Brown contends, “To invoke Hortense Spillers, Sally Hemings’ country need[ed] her, and if she did not exist, she would have to be invented. Such is the fate of [the] slave woman in relation to cultural memory. She existed, and we invented her anyway.”² Combating these invented narratives, as the epigraph to this text implies, requires “finding creative ways to work against archival gaps without propagating planter mentalities.”³ To that end, *Queering The Archive: Re-Examining Narratives of U.S. Chattel Slavery* “press[es] at the limits of the case file and the document, speculate[s] about what might have been, imagine[s] the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and amplif[ies] moments of withholding”⁴ in a bid to read and write into the silences and gaps imposed by the violence of subjection, and thus perhaps render it possible to queer collective cognizance of the archive.

¹ Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 215.

² Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (North Carolina: Duke University Press Books, 2015): 39.

³ Jim Downs, “When The Present Is Past: Writing The History of Sexuality and Slavery,” *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018): 4.

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019): xiv-xv.

However, in undertaking such a project, there is an inherent set of politics that come into play, of which one must be conscious if the intent is to produce work that is (re)generative rather than revisionist. In endeavoring to uncover facets of existence for the enslaved that extend beyond suffering, degradation, and death, it is key that the violence of forced forgetting is not merely supplanted by the erasure of emendation. Though the fragmented state of the archive necessitates reading between the lines, it is crucial that one does not (mis)use this practice as a kind of catharsis, reading into the gaps simply what one wishes to see. The anguish of slavery cannot be evaded by the specious writing of romances onto tragedies. However, to deny that the possibility of agency and even pleasure could have existed alongside the alienation and powerlessness that typify most recollections of slavery is to deny the enslaved the dignity of complexity.

How best, then, to write the Black queer ancestor (back) into existence? As Matt Richardson reminds us, “that [the Black queer ancestor] does not exist is a fiction of domination, an effect of trauma that has made her illegible even in alternative archives. To speak of her, one has to be creative.”⁵ This kind of creativity is necessary in order to read the narratives of and records concerning enslaved Black women* in ways that map the “impossible stories”⁶ potentially buried within them, to tell “a story that moves *beyond the silence*.”⁷ This project seeks to take up that work, moving to locate long-

⁵ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013): 14.

⁶ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12 (2008): 10.

⁷ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868* (Ballantine Books, 2001): Location 269.

buried histories of defiance, independence, and affection that work to trouble the continual narrowing of imagined space that Black women* are allowed to occupy in America's social memory. By adjusting the framework by which archival material has historically been examined, *Queering The Archive: Re-Examining Narratives of U.S. Chattel Slavery* allows other, queerer possibilities to come into view.

METHODOLOGY

This project, which consists of what I term a queer rereading of the U.S. slavery archive, centers around two primary research questions. The first: what types of stories does it become possible to tell when the archive is approached without the base assumption of cishetermnormativity? Also, how can the lens through which historical agents are viewed be adjusted so as to allow for “the Black queer ancestor”⁸ (or at least the possibility of her) to appear? In endeavoring to answer these questions, my work focuses on two key concerns: one, how enslaved (and formerly enslaved) women* conceived of and performed their own genders and two, how enslaved and formerly enslaved women* structured their relationships to each other and to white women. This project also considers the gender and relational practices of free Black women*, whose experiences informed and were informed by the conditions under which the enslaved lived.

Equal parts historical and speculative, *Queering the Archive* draws from a range of fields both ideologically and methodologically, including slavery studies, Black feminist theory, African American women's history, and Black queer theory. Additionally, in an effort to allow the enslaved to speak for themselves to the greatest

⁸ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 14.

extent possible, I perform close readings of the transcripts compiled throughout the course of the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project,⁹ in which hundreds of formerly enslaved individuals were interviewed about their experiences both during and after the epoch of U.S. chattel slavery. These narratives are then put into conversation with a number of additional primary documents as well as the life histories of more visible formerly enslaved women* such as Ellen Craft, Elizabeth Keckley, “Stagecoach” Mary Fields, Harriet Tubman, and Cathay Williams in order to draw parallels and tease out conceptual potentialities. The use of close readings allows me to delve deeply into the often self-narrated (and necessarily mediated) subjectivities of the individuals I research in ways that, I hope, will offer novel means by which to regard archival material.

In her groundbreaking work *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, author Lisa Lowe identifies what she terms “the politics of our lack of knowledge,”¹⁰ a concept that is useful for my project as it seeks to both confront the gaps and silences of the archive as well as underscore the inherent violences these elisions represent. Drawing on Lowe’s concept of “past conditional temporality”—through which she suggests “it is possible to conceive the past, not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating the temporality into which our present falls, but as a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable”¹¹—*Queering The Archive* moves to make visible the “multiple contingent possibilities” of a Black queer past that is often regarded (if at all) as unthinkable or even impossible. That is, rather than perpetuating the academic trend by which enslaved women’s* heterosexuality and gender conformity are treated as givens—

⁹ My research includes the narratives of all WPA participants identified as women as well as approximately one-fifth of those identified as men.

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015): 39.

¹¹ Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 175.

as “fixed or settled”—my research offers more expansive imaginative frames that allow for different types of questions to be asked. What does it mean to envision queer Black people as existing in the past? On the plantation? In the slave quarters?

This type of speculative work is informed in large part by Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus In Two Acts,” in which she asks:

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death [the enslaved]? Romances? Tragedies? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history...? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?¹²

I aim to give careful consideration to these inquiries—which are ultimately questions of methodology—in my project, as I endeavor to “shape...narratives written as counter-history” without either “replicating the grammar of violence” or romanticizing racial terror. Rather, I work to write Black queer subjectivity (back?) into historical narrative. This is done not as a way to mitigate or downplay the horrors of chattel slavery, but as a means by which to take seriously the prospect that our Black (queer) ancestors existed as complex, fully fleshed human beings rather than the always straight, necessarily cis figures of abjection they are routinely limned as.

My research, additionally, in seeking to advance the claim that enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* performed—or rather refused to perform—normative femininity in ways that pushed against prevailing social mores, uses visual analysis to assess a number of photographs and paintings, including those depicting figures like

¹² Hartman, “Venus In Two Acts,” 4.

Harriet Tubman, Mary Fields, and Ellen Craft. I examine these images not just for what they have been said to represent, but rather for what they *could* represent were we as scholars to broaden our academic imaginations. Could it be the case, for instance, that Craft—rather than donning men’s attire solely as a means of obtaining liberty, as her husband William suggests¹³—may have found pleasure in the act? (A particularly pertinent question given the alacrity with which she reassumed the disguise at abolitionist exhibitions long after escaping the South.)

What, too, are we to make of Harriet Jacobs’ eager embracing of creative crossdressing in her autobiography, *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl*¹⁴ or “Stagecoach” Mary Fields’ well-known reputation as “a Black gun-totin’ female in the American Wild West...[who] was six feet tall, heavy, tough, short-tempered, two-fisted, powerful, and packed a pair of six-shooters and an eight or 10-gauge shotgun”¹⁵ (of which she seemed immensely proud and which she seemed to actively cultivate)? This project takes seriously the prospect that these individuals—who regularly broke with gendered conventions—were not failed women, but successful subversives. *Queering the Archive* thus moves to unsettle the term ‘woman’ itself, styling it with an asterisk throughout in order to problematize overly neat categorizations of the figures it invokes, many of whom performed gender in nonconventional and insurgent ways. I mark these

¹³ Ellen Craft and William Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001; 1860): 24.

¹⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover Publications, 2001).

¹⁵ “The Legend of Stagecoach Mary,” Recorder (2017).

figures' relationships and performances as queer, a term "capacious enough to account for the fluid, evolving, emotional, and at times sensual [practices of Black] women both during and after enslavement — [practices] Richardson describes as 'irresolute' or 'unfixed, with movement and potential.'"¹⁶

LITERATURE REVIEW

"History is a production as much as an accounting of the past, and...our ability to recount has much to do with the conditions under which our subjects lived."

-Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*¹⁷

This project proceeds from a space of requisite anguish—the question of how one endeavors to tell the stories of those who were never meant to be written into relevance, those who left few clues as to what language might best speak to their experiences, and those who, most pressingly, might not have ever wished to have their stories told, should never be and indeed is not an easy question to answer. As Jim Downs queries: "Would [enslaved] women approve of the ways in which historians, all of whom possess well-meaning intentions, dig up details about their intimate lives? Are there ethical limits to the historical recovery of sexuality [and gender]?"¹⁸ If so, where do the edges of these limits lie? It is impossible to know. However, to eschew this 'digging up' entirely, to refuse to seek the stifled voices of those who came before, is to reinforce the silencing of the enslaved and the erasure of their subjectivities. And if history is, in fact—as Fuentes

¹⁶ Candice Lyons, "Behind the Scenes: Elizabeth Keckley, Slave Narratives, and the Queer Complexities of Space," *Feminist Studies* 47 (2021): 15–33.

¹⁷ Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 12.

¹⁸ Downs, "When The Present Is Past: Writing The History of Sexuality and Slavery," 193.

suggests—as much a production as it is an accounting of the past, then the question is less *whether* to delve into the intimacies and self-conceptions of enslaved Black women* than *how* to determine which frames allow one to do so respectfully and mindfully.

To that end, this work is greatly informed by Jessica Marie Johnson and Treva Lindsey’s piece “Searching For Climax: Black Erotic Lives In Slavery and Freedom,” which contends that “grappling with the erotic lives of Black women during slavery offers a new lens with which to comprehend the lived experiences of chattel slavery.”¹⁹ The authors use contemporary meditations on famed abolitionist Harriet Tubman (specifically All Def Digital’s “The Harriet Tubman Sex Tape”) to reflect on the visceral reaction the mere suggestion of enslaved women’s* sexual agency routinely elicits. Johnson and Lindsey critique what they see as the “collective desire to wholly memorialize U.S. chattel slavery as [solely] a site of suffering, violence, death, trauma, dehumanization, and exploitation”²⁰ and advocate instead for the recognition of the enslaved’s “radical Black...interiority.”²¹

This piece is in conversation with Stephanie M.H. Camp’s earlier work *Closer To Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance In The Plantation South*, which analyzes the everyday forms of resistance employed by the enslaved. In the text’s third chapter, “The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement: Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body,” Camp discusses the “outlaw” parties and dances numerous enslaved

¹⁹ Jessica Marie Johnson and Treva Lindsey, “Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom,” *Meridians* 12 (2014): 169.

²⁰ Johnson and Lindsey, “Searching For Climax,” 171.

²¹ Johnson and Lindsey, “Searching For Climax,” 171.

individuals reminisced about in their interviews and narratives. She details the amusements sought at such gatherings (including food, drink, and music), noting that “like another ‘invisible institution,’ slave Christianity, the secular institution was organized and inhabited in whispers and in code, in hiding and in the dark.”²² Camp emphasizes the embodied nature of these pursuits, underscoring once again the relevance of the enslaved body in thinking not only suffering and subjection, but also agency and pleasure. She adds:

Enslaved people, then, possessed at least three bodies. The first served as a site of domination; it was the body acted upon by slaveholders...The second body was the subjective experience of this process. It was the body as vehicle of feelings of terror, humiliation, and pain...Within and around plantations, however, enslaved people’s bodies were a hotly contested terrain of struggle. Again and again, slaves sought out illicit, secular gatherings of their own creation. They disregarded curfews and pass laws to escape to secret parties where sensual pleasures such as drinking, eating, dancing, and dressing up were the main amusements. This was the slave’s third body: a thing to be claimed and enjoyed, a site of pleasure and resistance.²³

Queering The Archive seeks to locate such deployments of enslaved Black women’s* “third bodies”—a concept which is in conversation with Katrina Dyonne Thompson’s *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*,²⁴ which examines Black American song, dance, and performance in order to make sense of the ways the enslaved navigated the conditions to which they were

²² Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer To Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 61.

²³ Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 66-68.

²⁴ Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel about: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

subjected. Thompson discusses the means by which enslaved people were taught to perform subservience while oftentimes simultaneously enacting agency; she also, like Camp, describes how enslaved individuals would “steal away” to illicit frolics where they would sing, dance, gossip, plan, exchange information (and possibly, this project will suggest, engage in queer sociality). The “backstage” world inhabited by the enslaved, Thompson maintains, provided space for ways of moving, knowing, and interacting not privy to the seemingly ubiquitous white gaze.

C. Riley Snorton contends with this very gaze in his 2014 monograph *Nobody Is Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality On The Down Low*, a text which draws from popular culture in order to stage an investigation into the ways Black sexualities are and have long been imagined, discussed, vilified, and weaponized. Snorton posits that Black sexuality has, for the duration of African-descendent people’s time in the United States, existed in what he dubs a “glass closet,”²⁵ into which spectators can gaze at will and from which it cannot escape. The glass of this closet proves opaque, however, when one considers the means by which the enslaved (in ways outlined in Camp and Thompson’s work) employed stealth and performative “ignorance”²⁶ to create space for a range of unsanctioned connections and non-normative self-conceptions while remaining (seemingly) perceptible to probing external observation. Or, as Snorton puts it: “while glass closets, stabilized by biopower and sutured together by institutional and social

²⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 16.

²⁶ Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know*, 33.

modes of regulation, may be a condition of Black sexual representation, they are not spaces in which their inhabitants lack the capacity to act.”²⁷ Enslaved women* may have been beholden to the predetermined parameters of normative white cisheteropatriarchal mores, but they were often able to operate within (and outside) them in ways that broke with slaveholder dicta and expectations.

Daphne Brooks attempts to parse the means by which these individuals performed such labor in *Bodies In Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. In the text, Brooks asserts that “African Americans rehearsed methods to transform the notion of ontological dislocation into resistant performance so as to become the agents of their own liberation.”²⁸ She contends that these performers utilized what she dubs “Afro-alienation” in order to disrupt and intervene in “the spectacular and systemic representational abjection of Black peoples.”²⁹ Brooks’ work attempts to grapple with the ways Black people (and Black women* in particular) worked to “image their own bodies” or “[do] their bodies differently in public spaces.”³⁰ *Queering The Archive* maps the realities of enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* who sought to enact just this sort of imaging, from more visible figures like “Stagecoach” Mary Fields and Harriet Tubman to the endlessly gender creative individuals who participated in the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project.

²⁷ Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know*, 34.

²⁸ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 3.

²⁹ Brooks, *Bodies In Dissent*, 8.

³⁰ Brooks, *Bodies In Dissent*, 8.

This process, Uri McMillan explains in *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, involved negotiating objectification in ways that paradoxically allowed for demonstrations of agency. McMillan contends that “objecthood provides a means for Black subjects to become art objects” via what he terms “performing objecthood”³¹—a process that enabled enslaved Black women* to rescript how their bodies were received and perceived by others. That is, performing objecthood, according to McMillan, provided a certain type of plasticity. In the case of his text’s subjects—most notably, for the purposes of this study, formerly enslaved abolitionist Ellen Craft—McMillan contends that the avatars they created “[were] a means of highlighting (and stretching) the subordinate roles available to Black women.”³²

Works invested, as *Queering The Archive* is, in mirroring this stretching of roles must attend to the gendered ways in which enslaved Black women* navigated their lived realities. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine’s *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery In The Americas* takes up this mantle, “focusing on the lives, situations, and experiences of slave and free Black women [along with] explor[ing] diverse dimensions of slavery and the related forces that shaped slave society to show that one of the most decisive of these forces was gender, however it may have been constructed in particular societies or applied in particular situations.”³³ Gaspar and Hine

³¹ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015): 7.

³² McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 12.

³³ David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): Location 78.

contend that examining slavery through the “prism” of Black women* challenges historical trends by which *enslaved men* have been made to stand in for *the enslaved*. They note that people of different genders experienced slavery differently, in large part due to the fact that Black women* were exploited for their ability to undertake both agricultural and reproductive labor. Enslaved women* resisted this double burden in a multitude of ways, the authors contend, because “they saw themselves as more than chattel, more than the personal property of another.”³⁴

In her contribution to the volume, author Brenda E. Stevenson posits that via a method she terms “autobiographical story,” enslaved Black women* were able to craft self-images that contrasted sharply with the prevailing perceptions of them as abject, promiscuous, degraded, and passive. This suggests that analysis of enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women’s* first person narratives might offer glimpses into the “backstage world” (to borrow from Thompson) these individuals inhabited—one in which they conceived of themselves and each other in ways that diverged from dominant understandings.

Saidiya Hartman grapples with the ongoing implications of these understandings in her substantive work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making In Nineteenth-Century America*, which opens with a discussion of the Aunt Hester sequence (which Hartman chooses not to reproduce) from Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*. Her decision not to detail this event—which, for both Douglass and his narrative, were

³⁴ Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, Location 97.

formative—is meant as a commentary on the “casualness” with which scholars and indeed society at large routinely spectacularize the Black body in pain. Hartman questions the motivation behind such tendencies, interrogating whether “we [are] witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened” or “voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance.”³⁵

In “A Note on Method,” Hartman identifies the issues of hierarchy within and desire to create palatable national pasts via official records and narratives of the enslaved (such as the WPA). Given this, she contends, it is necessary to reclaim “archival material for contrary purposes”³⁶ because, “there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents.”³⁷ Hartman iterates that she attempts to read these materials against the grain but acknowledges the potential limitations and pitfalls of invoking such sources, rooted—as they are—in “barbarism.” *Queering The Archive* confronts and navigates many of these same issues, seeking to appropriate available archival materials—though rooted in barbarism, as many of them undoubtedly are³⁸—for “contrary purposes.”

³⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 3.

³⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 10.

³⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 10.

³⁸ This is especially relevant given the fact that the primary archive utilized in this study is the collection of transcripts compiled during the course of the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project. While the WPA is undoubtedly a valuable resource, it by no means offers a complete, unobstructed view into U.S. enslaved subjectivities. Power disparities and the likelihood of omissions must be taken into account. These issues of mediation are taken up by a number of scholars, including Thavolia Glymph in her work *Out of the House of Bondage* (cited below). However, as Glymph herself points out, “for many ex-slaves, the WPA interviews represented their only and last formal opportunity to speak openly about slavery,” (p. 16) and thus constitute an appropriate, if imperfect, source from which to draw archival material.

Hartman herself offers a model of what such reclamations might look like in her stunning work *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, maintaining that examination not only of Black women's* words, but also the words written *about* them (in state documents, in official records) allows for the mapping of the myriad ways this demographic has historically sought "to make living an art."³⁹ Explaining that she utilizes a range of archival materials in order to parse the stories of the women* she studies and "employ[s] a mode of close narration, a style which places the voice of the narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythm of the wayward shape and arrange the text,"⁴⁰ (xiii-xiv) Hartman positions her work once again as offering a counternarrative. She adds, "the wild idea that animates this book is that young Black women were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise."⁴¹ The interlocutors invoked in *Queering The Archive*—Black women* who destabilized gender expectations and arranged their lives and relationships in an array of complex and potentially queer ways—may have participated in these same kinds of tireless (re)imaginings.

C. Riley Snorton's *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* sets out a frame for how one might go about interpreting these insurgent self-conceptions of the enslaved. In his text, Snorton explains that "although the perception that 'race' and

³⁹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiv.

⁴⁰ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiii-xiv.

⁴¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*.

‘gender’ are fixed and knowable terms is the dominant logic of identity, in this book ‘trans’ is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and ‘Blackness’ signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility.”⁴² He adds, “Here, trans—in each of its permutations—finds expression and continuous circulation within Blackness, and Blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender.”⁴³ Snorton meditates on what it means to read “Black” and “trans” using a frame of transitivity, which he contends “requires that one become acquainted with the social life of things, which is also to consider how one’s relationship to things and as a thing entails a confrontation and rethinking of the past as it has been rendered into History.”⁴⁴ He notes that *Black On Both Sides* is “particularly attentive to the possibilities of valorizing—without necessarily redeeming—different ways of knowing and being, as it is also invested in reviving and inventing strategies for inhabiting unlivable worlds.”⁴⁵ Snorton emphasizes what he terms a “right to opacity” and explains that due in part to his bid to honor this right, *Black On Both Sides* “does not attempt to be exhaustive or even fully explanatory.”⁴⁶ Taking a cue from Snorton, *Queering The Archive* considers how best to queer or “trans” the ways archival documents are read without purporting or attempting to fully account for the intimate and gendered realities of the women* analyzed. By attempting to recover the long-submerged

⁴² C. Riley Snorton, *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 2.

⁴³ Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 2.

⁴⁴ Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 6.

⁴⁵ Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 7.

⁴⁶ Snorton, *Black On Both Sides*, 11.

narratives of these individuals while still making space for their “right to opacity,” this study might succeed in working within the “ethical limits to...historical recovery” with which it concerns itself.

Though rooted in multiple disciplines, *Queering The Archive* seeks to make a particular intervention within the realm of slavery studies by lending an additional (distinctly queer) dimension to conversations dating as far back as the publication of U.B. Phillips’ highly problematic 1918 monograph *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime*.⁴⁷ Considered for years to be a defining text within the field, Phillips’ work offers a sweeping overview of United States chattel slavery that extensively references the words and records of slaveholding plantation owners (of whom Phillips is clearly sympathetic and who are depicted throughout the book as benevolent and fair in their dealings with the enslaved).

Decades later, historian Stanley Elkins would attempt to qualify some of his predecessor’s more controversial claims, only to ultimately reproduce many of the same planter logics. In his 1959 piece *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*,⁴⁸ Elkins uses psychological theory to parse ongoing debates within the field of slavery studies, specifically the validity of the “Sambo” archetype, which Elkins considers to be rooted, at least in part, in actual social and circumstantial realities.

⁴⁷ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime* (New York: Peter Smith, 1918, 1952).

⁴⁸ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, 1976).

Although the author diverges from Phillips in his assertion that what he deems the infantilization of the enslaved (and ostensibly their descendants) emanates from socialization rather than inherent deficiencies, his work ultimately discounts (in ways similar to those found in *American Negro Slavery*) the ability of enslaved Black people to resist and disidentify with white power structures while simultaneously, it is key to note, effectually invisibilizing enslaved Black women*.

Later scholars would depart from these earlier models by centering the voices and self-narrated experiences of those held in bondage, though masculinist understandings of slave subjectivity would persist. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, for instance, offers a multi-faceted account of enslaved subjectivities that draws from (along with a range of other sources) the first-hand narratives of enslaved people; however, the text's evident investment in reclaiming and affirming the masculinity of Black men, ostensibly threatened in the work of scholars like Phillips and Elkins, perhaps unintentionally ends up translating to an absencing of enslaved Black women*. This trend is prevalent throughout the book, which concerns itself with identifying the moments in which the enslaved subject "acted like a man, castigating whites for their mistreatment of him [and] being a leader, protector, and provider."⁴⁹

Such a focus is echoed in the writings of historians like Eugene Genovese, who—in his 1976 publication *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made*—writes:

⁴⁹ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972): 190.

the slaves' response to paternalism and their imaginative creation of a partially autonomous religion provided a record of simultaneous accommodation and resistance to slavery. Accommodation itself breathed a critical spirit and disguised subversive actions and often embraced its apparent opposite—resistance. In fact, accommodation might best be understood as a way of accepting what could not be helped without falling prey to the pressures for dehumanization, *emasculat*ion, and self-hatred”⁵⁰ [emphasis mine].

Though the capacity for navigating enslavement in subtly insurgent ways was now, in a marked departure from earlier scholarship, positioned as a possibility, it was still a possibility largely reserved for enslaved Black men.

The following decade represented a significant shift in the literature, as academics like Deborah Gray White began to launch investigations into the unique experiences of Black women* living under enslavement. White's foundational text *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* notes the paucity of research up to that point centering on such individuals and elaborates on what she views as the two primary reasons for this dearth. “The first,” she explains, “has to do with the way the issues of the recent debate over slavery were defined [so as to prioritize men's experience of slavery]; the second, with the difficulty in finding source material that throws light on the experience of slave women.”⁵¹ The schism represented by the former consideration, White contends, does a disservice to enslaved Black women*; her work then, as something of a corrective, focuses on bonded antebellum women* and concerns itself with beginning to fill some of these scholarly gaps.

⁵⁰ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974): 598.

⁵¹ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman*, 17.

The work of White and her contemporaries has helped to usher in new waves of thinkers concerned not only with analyzing the effects of U.S. chattel slavery from the perspective of the women* directly impacted by it, but also—in the writings of scholars such as Stephanie M.H. Camp, Daina Berry, Treva Lindsey, and Jessica Marie Johnson, cited above—the means by which these women structured their relationships to others and actively sought pleasure. *Queering The Archive* builds on this scholarship by considering how reading queerness onto the ways many Black women* navigated their enslavement opens up new avenues for examining the agential labor of these individuals.

To that end, each of this work’s five chapters weaves together narratives of multiple formerly enslaved Black women* in order to parse the ways these women* understood, performed, and destabilized sexuality and gender. The first traces histories of Black intersex people in the ante- and post-bellum United States, whose bodies and performances of gender offer insight into the ways corporeal ambiguity has historically been bound to the specter of queerness. Chapter Two examines the short-lived yet highly visible gender digressions of abolitionist Ellen Craft, who disguised herself as a “[disabled] white gentleman” in order to make her escape to the North and Harriet Jacobs, who describes an instance of creative cross-dressing in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I examine the ways a kind of subversive gratification was rendered possible in these liberatory performances of masculinity, and tie both women’s stories to those of WPA participants who discuss gender transgression as both policed and pleasurable. The chapter also places the life histories of “Stagecoach” Mary Fields and Harriet Tubman into conversation with those of WPA respondents whose

gendered embodiments and understandings of self implore us to critically re-evaluate enslaved women's* varied (non)performances of femininity.

Chapter Three explores the ways the enslaved used language to name and give voice to their experiences, and analyzes the narratives of both enslaved and free nineteenth century Black women* in order to make sense of the ways these individuals negotiated (and at times rejected) heterosexual marriage and biological motherhood, often choosing to organize their domestic spheres in ways that broke with normative convention.

In Chapter Four, I contrast the story of Shaker eldress Rebecca Jackson and her companion Rebecca Perot with those of other enslaved and free Black women*, tracing the queer connections forged between such women* in the antebellum and postbellum United States. Finally, Chapter Five examines the relationships between Black and white U.S. women* during the antebellum and postbellum years, using the autobiography of famed modiste Elizabeth Keckley and the life history of "Stagecoach" Mary Fields as points of departure.

Chapter One: “Baldheaded Like A Man And She Shaves:” Gender Transgression and Black Intersex Identity

Born enslaved near Cotton Plant, Arkansas in the years leading up to Emancipation, WPA respondent Josie Martin’s brief interview centers largely around her descriptions of being raised in captivity. One of seven children, Martin and her parents were enslaved by a “Master Martin... [who] come [to Arkansas] from Mississippi”⁵² before eventually emancipating those he enslaved upon the conclusion of the War. Shortly after, Josie’s mother “died when [Martin] was but a girl and left a family on [her] hands,”⁵³ including several younger siblings whose education Martin worked to subsidize. This work included a stint as a cook on a boarding train where “all the railroad hands working on the tracks roomed and [ate]” as well as a side business where Josie sold “herbs for diarrhea and piles.”⁵⁴ As she aged, however, increased access to drugstores rendered this latter endeavor obsolete while her declining health rendered the former impossible. Compounding this reality were the deaths of each of Josie’s siblings, the final of which left her “lone in the world.”⁵⁵

In her WPA transcript, Martin’s succinct detailing of these events is reported neutrally and without comment. However, as the conversation turns to the matter of her

⁵² Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

⁵³ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

⁵⁴ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

⁵⁵ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

gender presentation, the misapprehensions of Josie’s interviewer, Irene Robertson, become evident.

Asked to account for her physical appearance, Martin explains, “I [once] had long straight hair nearly to my knees. It come out after a spell of typhoid fever. It never come in to do no good.”⁵⁶ Robertson, however, immediately contests this version of events, implying that Josie intentionally keeps her hair cut short. In a brief editor’s note, she writes, “[Josie is] baldheaded like a man and she shaves.”⁵⁷ This abrupt textual break is indicative of the sort of rupture a figure like Josie Martin would have represented, particularly to observers like Robertson, whose pseudo-authoritative imposition onto her subject’s attempt at self-narration signals an investment in the corrective.

This is especially evident later in the text, when Robertson notes, “[Josie] is a hermaphrodite, [which is her] reason for never marrying.”⁵⁸ While it is unclear whether the interviewer’s description of Martin as intersex is accurate (especially given the fact that Martin does not use this language to describe herself), this imposed classification points to the ways Black women* whose gender presentations diverged from hegemonic norms were routinely rendered illegible. In a move reflective of post-bellum medical and lay perceptions that cast Black intersex bodies as—paradoxically enough—both

⁵⁶ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

⁵⁷ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

⁵⁸ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

“impossible” and in need of repair,⁵⁹ Robertson rescripts her interviewee’s narrative into one of alterity, ignoring Josie’s own words in the process.

In this way, Martin’s story is emblematic of the ways Black genders were regularly being (mis)represented by a phobic public in the pre- and post-Emancipation years, even as these gender boundaries were simultaneously being shaped intracommunally. Tracing this process requires grappling with the ways Black people—and specifically Black women*—with nondimorphic bodies navigated their social and interpersonal contexts, seeking to speak to their own experiences even as they were being spoken over.

19TH CENTURY

Nineteenth century mainstream understandings of intersex identity rooted themselves in long-standing notions of deviance, with the figure of the somatically ambiguous routinely “be[ing] used implicitly and intricately to shore up notions of what [was] normal and what [was] not.”⁶⁰ This was especially true given that, as Hil Malatino points out, “intersexuality [was] a major conceptual center of queerness, the figure that nonnormative genders and desires...have been historically understood through and in relation to.”⁶¹ He adds:

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites: Intersex in America 1620-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 92 (2005).

⁶⁰ Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1995): 5.

⁶¹ Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019): 10.

What it means and has meant to have a legible body in the West—at least since the early modern period—has relied, on ways both straightforward and subtle, on the utilization of intersex bodies as impossible objects, as limit-figures that become interred in the ground upon which legitimate, recognizable, and acceptable sexed bodies are built. Intersex bodies thus become a figure whose specter is called forth periodically in order to be disavowed, derealized, and delegitimated once more.⁶²

Key to this process of delegitimation was the construction of the intersex body as a knowable, dissectible, diagnosable entity—a question of science that needed to and could be solved. As matters of corporeal non-dimorphism moved from “the realm of the monstrous to the realm of the abnormal”⁶³—signaling a significant shift from eighteenth century perceptions of intersexuality as a form of divine retribution—the ways medical authorities not only “observed and reported on bodies [but also] *construct[ed]* bodies through particular investigatory techniques and culturally lodged research goals”⁶⁴ became increasingly evident. As Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla point out in their edited volume *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science*:

Bodies do not exist in terms of an a priori essence, anterior to techniques and practices that are imposed upon them. They are neither transhistorical sets of needs and desires nor natural objects preexisting cultural (and, indeed, scientific) representation. They are effects, products, or symptoms of specific techniques and regulatory practices. In short, bodies are points on which and from which the disciplinary power of scientific investigations and their popular appropriations is exercised... Knowable only through culture and history, they are not in any simple way natural or ever free of relations of power. [Thus,] scientific and popular modes of representing bodies are never innocent but always tie bodies to larger systems of knowledge production and, indeed, to social and material inequality.⁶⁵

⁶² Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 7.

⁶³ Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 7.

⁶⁴ Terry and Urla, *Deviant Bodies*, 3.

⁶⁵ Terry and Urla, *Deviant Bodies*, 3.

For intersex people in the nineteenth century United States, the creation of their bodies and enshrinement of those bodies within the rapidly professionalizing medical field were bound not only to persistent anxieties about ‘normalcy’ and deviance, but also—intimately—to the specter of queerness. Concerns, for instance, about the possibility of intersex individuals forging non-normative romantic connections (or at the very least, failing to pursue normative ones) likely prompted the uptick toward the end of the 1800s of ‘corrective’ surgeries, which in earlier eras had been much less frequent.⁶⁶

These procedures—which typically included some form of genital modification—were often performed at the behest of a patient’s physician, in spite of ongoing risks and unusually high mortality rates. Often, the operations were undertaken not to improve patients’ overall quality of life or address pressing medical issues, but rather to ensure that intersex people would be able to engage in heterosexual sex and thus enter into normative heterosexual marriages. Those deemed by doctors to be women, for instance, frequently had their vaginal canals deepened in order to better accommodate the phalluses of their hypothetical future husbands.⁶⁷ That these procedures often resulted in recipients bleeding heavily—and in some cases, bleeding to death—was routinely treated as a necessary risk. This fixation on ensuring the possibility of marriage and, when possible, child rearing reflected a pervasive cultural insistence that “individuals with ambiguous genital conformation were...potential homosexuals or ‘inverts;’ if people

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): Location 78.

⁶⁷ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 78.

looked both male and female, in their confusion, they might be attracted to people of the ‘wrong’ sex.”⁶⁸

Additionally, in the years leading up to and following Emancipation, perceptions of intersexuality were informed by two “cultural preoccupations [that] colored the anxiety about hermaphrodites in the period of the new republic: worries about racial instability and concerns about deception and fraud.”⁶⁹ As geographic mobility became more tenable in the nineteenth century, apprehensions about the possibility of people remaking themselves in ‘deceptive’ ways intensified and were projected onto those who were or might be intersex. Given this, doctors strove to determine their patients’ ‘true’ sex in cases of genital or other forms of non-dimorphism, refusing to allow for ambiguity or uncertainty as options. At the same time, people outside of the medical field were attempting to prevent these individuals—often perceived as inherently duplicitous—from leveraging their illegibility to access privileges of citizenship (such as voting and land ownership) to which they were often not seen as being truly entitled.

Paradoxically, despite attempts to guarantee intersex people’s participation in heterosexual marriage and procreation, these concerns about deception often came to bear on the romantic and matrimonial outcomes of those with non-dimorphic bodies. To that end, the case of a late nineteenth century (white) intersex Ohioan, referred to in the relevant literature simply as ‘X,’ proves especially illuminative. A patient of Dr. J.B. Naylor, the unnamed man’s narrative is taken up in Elizabeth Reis’ *Bodies In Doubt: An*

⁶⁸ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 757.

⁶⁹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 413.

American History of Intersex, which outlines Naylor’s glaringly subjective 1896 account wherein X is described as having had “somewhat of a romantic history.”⁷⁰ Raised as a girl, the patient “wore feminine apparel and bore a feminine appellation” up until the age of seventeen and “was to all appearances, intents, and purposes, a female.” Naylor adds that the young man “performed the duties of a domestic, learned to sew and knit...and slept with his girlfriends. But [then] presto! change! all at once—without previous symptom or warning—he blossomed out as a full-blown male.”⁷¹ At this point, the patient began to wear “men’s clothes...chew and smoke tobacco, [play] the fiddle for country dances, and [associate] with naughty men” whose behavior he “ape[d].”⁷² The most shocking detail of this shift, though—at least in Naylor’s view—is the fact that “at the age of 35 [the patient] married—a woman!”⁷³

The physician follows up this revelation with the addendum that “After three months, X’s wife sought a divorce on the grounds that he was impotent. She testified...that ‘owing to his unsatisfied sexual desire, he would not let her sleep at all.’”⁷⁴ Naylor’s framing here is emblematic of the ways intersex people’s lives (including their sex lives) were often cast as tales of tragedy, frustration, and failure in the antebellum and postbellum years. X’s alleged inability to fulfill his sexual desires—which according to Naylor stemmed from the fact that “though X had a penis, testicular tissue, and ‘male

⁷⁰ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 904.

⁷¹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 904.

⁷² Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 904.

⁷³ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 904.

⁷⁴ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 904.

passions,' he could not ejaculate because his penis was imperforate"⁷⁵—rendered the patient in this assessment as not only a failed man *and* a failed woman, but also an overly demanding and undesirable sexual partner.

In this, X's case bears a striking resemblance to one detailed in the 1804 divorce filing of North Carolinian Cassandra Alexander Houston, who was seeking the dissolution of her marriage to husband James Houston. The two had been wed only one year prior, after which Cassandra "left [James] 'owing (as she verily believe[d]) to her Husbands [sic] imbecillity or impotency as a man in procreating his species."⁷⁶ The case description continues:

Depositions from the petitioner's relatives and others state that they suspected from observing him "make water" that James Houston was not a man like other men; that he had expressed anxiety that "he was not as complete as to genitals as other men;" and that he had on several occasions attempted to "ride" other men and "act with [other men] as man would with a Woman." Marshal Alexander, Cassandra's brother, stated in a deposition that he was once the object of such attempts and noticed at the time that Houston had no testicles. With the marriage unconsummated, the evidence suggesting that Houston "had not the genitals for propagation," and the Alexander's believing that Houston married solely to obtain property, Cassandra Alexander asks to retain her property and be granted a divorce.⁷⁷

With this depiction, Cassandra and her witnesses were at once reproducing eighteenth century connotations of intersexuality with monstrosity, reifying the nineteenth century

⁷⁵ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 913.

⁷⁶ Cassandra Alexander Houston. *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks*, Series I: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1777-1867. Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

⁷⁷ Cassandra Alexander Houston. *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks*, Series I: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1777-1867. Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

equating of corporeal ambiguity with duplicity, *and* depicting James’ apparently queer desires as desperate and aberrant. Houston is thus marked in this account as deviant, and that deviance is couched as being located in the body, namely in James’ ambiguous corporeal conformation. The language of difference and inadequacy—central to the portrayal of Houston being unlike other men as well as genitally ‘incomplete’—points to the ways that, as Urla and Terry note, “in nineteenth century...America, the belief that moral character and psychical features were fundamentally tied to biology came to the fore with a vengeance at a moment of heated debate about who would enjoy the privileges of legal and economic enfranchisement.”⁷⁸ It is telling that Houston’s own descriptions of his body are portrayed throughout the filing as a deceitful attempt to appropriate property from his wife through omission, despite the fact that—by Cassandra’s own admission—James was forthcoming about his corporeal “anxiety.”

As in the case of Naylor’s patient X, Houston’s narrative underscores the many, often violent slippages underlying perceptions about intersex people in the nineteenth century United States. The responses of X and Houston’s wives—and more to the point, those of the medical community and the courts—to these two instances of somatic ambiguity reflect “a feverish desire to classify forms of deviance, to locate them in biology, and thus to police them in the larger social body”⁷⁹ during the antebellum and postbellum years. Intersex people, then, were faced with a precarious set of concurrent and contradictory social maxims: pursue traditionally heteronormative, procreative

⁷⁸ Terry and Urla, *Deviant Bodies*, 1.

⁷⁹ Terry and Urla, *Deviant Bodies*, 1.

relationships (changing one's body to do so, if necessary) and be prepared to have those relationships regarded as fraudulent. Be willing to disclose the most intimate aspects of one's existence, and expect to be sanctioned for those disclosures.

For Black people with non-dimorphic bodies in the nineteenth century, such social realities manifested in ways that diverged widely from those of their white counterparts. This was especially true given that—as Siobhan Somerville explains in her piece “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body”—“the concurrent bifurcations of categories of race and sexuality were not only historically coincident but in fact structurally interdependent and perhaps mutually productive.”⁸⁰ That is, as understandings of (queer) gender and sexuality concretized over the course of the nineteenth century into discrete, namable categories as opposed to nebulous descriptions of behaviors, this process consistently relied on the image of the Black body as a site of transgression in order to orient analysis of the non-normative. Tracing the ways Black intersexuality was routinely positioned as a synecdoche for gender and sexual expansiveness is key to “understand[ing] how discourses of race and gender buttressed one another, often competing, often overlapping, in shaping emerging models of [queerness].”⁸¹

On the one hand, throughout the nineteenth century, Black people's non-citizen status provided an avenue away from some—though certainly not all—of the violences

⁸⁰ Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 246.

⁸¹ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 247.

facing people like X and James Houston. Such individuals' participation in traditional marriage, for example, (to which they had limited access to begin with) would not have been viewed as important enough to warrant costly 'corrective' surgery. Further, Black people with ambiguous conformations were less likely to be subjected to exploratory examinations to determine their rights in legal matters like enfranchisement or inheritance, since Black people were largely already excluded from these kinds of societal benefits. In addition, during a time when the mere existence of intersex people was enough to trigger minor moral panics about the possibility of sexual deviance and 'perversion,' "no one cared if a black person was threatened with the 'ruin of character and peace of mind' brought on by doubtful sex[;] indeed, the very fact of a person's blackness meant that that person's character was constitutionally incapable of experiencing something like ruin."⁸²

On the other hand, due to their tenuous access to social and representational protection, Black intersex people were more likely than their white counterparts to have their records featured in medical journals, often "in 'degrading' ... reports that 'speculated upon sexuality.'"⁸³ This was especially true for Black women* with non-dimorphic bodies, given that "Although popular racist mythology in the nineteenth-century United States focused on the supposed difference between the size of African-American and white men's genitalia, the male body was not necessarily the primary site of medical

⁸² Zine Magubane, "Spectacles and Scholarship: Caster Semenya, Intersex Studies, and the Problem of Race in Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39 (2014): 776.

⁸³ Magubane, "Spectacles and Scholarship," 769.

inquiry into racial difference.”⁸⁴ Rather, as medical journals from the period indicate, scientists “repeatedly located racial difference through the sexual characteristics of the female body.”⁸⁵ In their 1867 piece “Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman,” for instance, comparative anatomists W.H. Flower and James Murie center much of their focus on their subject’s genitalia, specifically “the remarkable development of [her] labia minora,”⁸⁶ which they argue marks the young woman not only as distinct from white women, but as part of another species entirely. The two researchers therefore imply that the “racial difference of the [Black woman’s] body...was located in its literal excess, a specifically sexual excess that placed her outside the boundaries of the ‘normal’ female.”⁸⁷

This excess was intricately tied to ideas about sexuality, given that the ways Black women’s* bodies were described in nineteenth century medical literature was often analogous to depictions of queer women’s* corporealities across race. Throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, “medical journals contained articles declaring that ‘a physical examination of [female homosexuals] will in practically every instance disclose an abnormally prominent clitoris...’ [One] author added, ‘This is particularly so in colored women.’”⁸⁸ For Black intersex women*, then, descriptions of elongated clitorises, hypospadiac penises, and muscular statures marked them as sexually suspect

⁸⁴ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 251.

⁸⁵ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 251.

⁸⁶ W.H. Flower and James Murie, “Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman,” *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* 1 (1867): 208.

⁸⁷ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 252.

⁸⁸ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 253.

and aligned them with non-normative desires regardless of how their intimate relationships were actually structured.

These conflations shaped Black intersex women's* experiences even as debates raged among medical practitioners about whether intersexuality was even possible. The prevailing insistence throughout the nineteenth century that the intersex body was “a mute [one,] whose surface was to be interpreted by those with medical authority”⁸⁹ rendered Black women* with ambiguous somatic conformations susceptible to heightened medical scrutiny even in death, as their bodies were posthumously examined in search of examples of ‘true hermaphroditism’ (that is, cases in which a patient possessed an ovotestis containing both ovarian and testicular tissue). In 1850 Jonathan Neill, an anatomy professor at the University of Pennsylvania, “presented a subject he believed was ‘certainly entitled to the term hermaphrodite’⁹⁰—a deceased intersex Black woman* who had been brought to the university for an autopsy. Little was known about the unnamed subject aside from reports that she had “resided among the degraded Blacks in the lower portion of the city” and had apparently died of “drunkenness and exposure.”⁹¹

Focusing his subsequent examination, like his contemporaries Flower and Murie, on the young woman's genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, Neill discovered large breasts, a hairless face, broad shoulders, a uterus, ovaries, an elongated clitoris, fallopian

⁸⁹ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 263.

⁹⁰ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 628.

⁹¹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 628.

tubes, “and a narrow vagina ‘of the proper length.’”⁹² All together, these features marked the subject in Neill’s view as “more female than male,” prompting him to classify her condition as a case of “spurious hermaphroditism in the female.”⁹³ This declaration is emblematic of the ways physicians of the era operated under “the assumption that the body was a legible text, with various keys or languages available for reading its symbolic codes”⁹⁴—and that they alone possessed the authority to interpret these codes. Neill’s attempts to determine his subject’s ‘true’ sex (and thus, in his mind, true gender) was undertaken with little regard for how the young woman understood herself. Though she was brought to the university as a cadaver and therefore could not speak to her own experiences, Neill’s subject was “dressed in women’s clothes”⁹⁵ and had apparently lived as a woman prior to her death. The doctor’s decision to treat his subject’s self-gendering as a potential act of deception underscores that for antebellum and postbellum Black intersex women*, questions of identity were considered medical, rather than personal, matters.

Also striking about Neill’s account is the sketch he included of the woman* autopsied. Despite the fact that her examination was post-mortem, the subject is depicted in Neill’s drawing standing, naked, with her hand resting against a nearby table. As Elizabeth Reis notes, “the figure [in this image] looks more like a Greek...goddess than

⁹² Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 637.

⁹³ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 637.

⁹⁴ Somerville, “Scientific Racism,” 250.

⁹⁵ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 628.

someone devastated by alcohol and poverty.”⁹⁶ The coy and somewhat revisionist nature of the illustration marks Neill’s rendering as perplexingly intimate and subtly erotic, belying the sterility of his accompanying anatomical assessment. This simultaneous distrust of and fascination with Black women’s* bodies was a common one, and pointed to a kind of proprietary desire obscured within pages of medical jargon and disavowal.

Years earlier, Neill’s predecessor Georges Cuvier, a nineteenth century French naturalist, seemed to be writing through a similar paradox. His notes on the body of Sarah Baartman—a South African woman* who had become a source of cross-continental intrigue after her exhibition in France and the United Kingdom in the early 1800s—are, like Neill’s, intensely focused on uncovering the ‘truth’ about the subject’s non-normative Black body, which Cuvier casts as primitive and sub-human. Yet, as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting points out in *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*, Cuvier’s descriptions of Baartman’s genitalia are characterized by “language [that] is flowery and feminine”⁹⁷ as he portrays the various parts of her vulva as “fleshy, rippled petals, crests, and heart-shaped figures.”⁹⁸ Even as Cuvier claims repulsion, his writing reflects that he is drawn to Baartman, enticed by a body that in his view marks her as phenotypically Other. In the case of both Sarah and Neill’s subject “the ways of seeing [Black women*] as exotic...invisible, and as

⁹⁶ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 637.

⁹⁷ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1999): 28.

⁹⁸ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 28.

something to be...consumed”⁹⁹ are evident, particularly for those who were intersex or somatically distinct. Scientist’s patient sketches and examination notes in the pre- and post-Emancipation years reveal how throughout the nineteenth century, these women’s* bodies were rendered sites of extraction, from which medical knowledge, professional mobility, and a particular brand of libidinous frisson could be elicited.

These case studies provide a useful context for evaluating two drawings excerpted from the William Massie Papers, archived at The University of Texas at Austin’s Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. Massie, who owned and operated four Virginia plantations between the years of 1795 and 1862, kept detailed accounts of his financial transactions—including the funds expended on those he enslaved, which he documented in several small, bound “Negro/Negro Account Book[s].”

On the cover of the volume dated 1836-1839,¹⁰⁰ someone (perhaps Massie himself) has sketched two small, coded-as-Black figures with tightly coiled hair. At first glance, the sketch appears to be fairly anodyne; however on closer inspection, it seems that the figure in the foreground of the image, dressed in ‘men’s’ clothing, has had their genitalia scratched out.

On the following account book, dated 1840-1849,¹⁰¹ the same two figures are depicted, though in this instance the genitalia of both are clearly visible. In fact, the body

⁹⁹ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ William Massie, “Negro Account Book 1836-1839,” Box 2E506, William Massie Papers, 1747-1919, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰¹ William Massie, “Negro Book 1840-1849,” Box 2E506, William Massie Papers, 1747-1919, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

of the figure dressed in ‘women’s’ attire is *entirely* visible, even through their clothing. Interestingly, though in this rendition the figure on the left’s privates are clearly phallic, their companion’s are not especially vulval. It is unclear whether this is due to artist error or whether the intention was to depict ambiguous genitalia.

This latter possibility is not unlikely, as white antebellum and postbellum observers were often both aware of and actively documenting the non-dimorphisms of nineteenth century Black women*. In 1887, physicians William E. Moseley and Robert B. Morison, in fact, wrote of a “large, powerfully built, dark negro woman apparently between forty and fifty years of age” who they treated for ““general enlargement of the right labium major,’ which resulted in a ‘large mass hanging down between her thighs.’”¹⁰² This description bears a striking resemblance to the second Massie sketch. As in the case of Jonathan Neill’s drawing of his intersex subject, drafted just one year after the final date accounted for in Massie’s “Negro Book,” this portrayal of a corporeally ambiguous Black woman* positions her as an observable, knowable spectacle. It is possible the artist based his rendering of her on an actual person, enslaved on one of Massie’s many plantations. It is equally possible that she was purely a figment of Massie’s imagination, or that of someone he employed. Either way, she exists in this image as a curiosity—one meant to amuse and perhaps titillate, “a mute body” made legible only in her silence. These portrayals highlight the ways Black intersex women’s* bodies remained focal points in public discussions of (and private meditations on) matters

¹⁰² William E. Moseley and Robert B. Morison, “Elephantiasis Arabum of the External Genitals of a Negress,” *Medical News* 50 (1887): 462.

of normalcy, deviance, sexuality, and gender throughout the nineteenth century, even as little attention was being paid to the ways these women* were speaking to their own subjectivities.

20TH CENTURY

These cycles of enthrallment and invalidation carried over into the first few decades of the twentieth century, though they manifested differently as perceptions of intersex people within and outside of the medical field took on new inflections. These perceptions were informed by the prior century's suppositions and, in turn, actively informed reactions to those with ambiguous conformations well into the 1930s, including formerly enslaved Black women* like Josie Martin. Grappling with these women's* narratives requires tracing the ways understandings of their bodies, sexual histories, and self-articulations continued to be read through a lens of deviance within twentieth century medical literature, WPA narratives, and larger societal discourses.

By the early 1900s, the ability to “assess the gonads [of patients] by taking tissue samples and examining them under a microscope [made it possible for] a person's sex [to] presumably be ascertained while he or she was still alive.”¹⁰³ However, individuals' understandings of their own gender experiences often conflicted with the findings of these biopsies, prompting pathologization. In cases where doctors, for instance, determined—via external or internal probes—an intersex patient's ‘true’ sex (generally conflated with gender), only to have that person insist on continuing to live as a person of

¹⁰³ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1114.

another gender, the patient was often diagnosed with ‘physical hermaphroditism.’ This designation is analogous to more contemporary understandings of trans* identity, as those with nondimorphic corporealities resisted scientific insistence that gender was to be found in the body, and only by (cisnormative) medical professionals.

This resistance came at a price however, given that the act of intersex people refusing to relinquish control over their genders to self-appointed ‘experts’ came to be “relegated to the realm of the psychic...One could be born not hermaphroditic but only an ‘unfinished’ man or woman, yet one could manifest a psychological disorder characterized by understanding—contra supposed biological fact—one’s experience...as merging elements of male and female. [Intersexuality thus became] a mental rather than material phenomena.”¹⁰⁴ This pathologizing of intersexuality as a form of mental illness, in turn, informed the often violent and dehumanizing ways the genders of intersex people were policed.

For Black non-dimorphic patients this was especially true, as the 1939 case of an intersex man whose body became a source of both medical and legal scrutiny makes evident. Having been accused by his partner of fathering her unborn child, the young man, Louis, denied paternity “claiming that the girlfriend had been pregnant when they met, and that there had been no vaginal insemination during intercourse.”¹⁰⁵ Years earlier, doctors had urged Louis’ family to subject him to ‘corrective’ surgery in order to remove his “redundant clitoris” and raise him as a girl. Though they appear to have

¹⁰⁴ Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁵ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1409-1411.

followed this latter piece of advice, the family had refused surgery; that decision was now considered by the patient's medical team to be "prescient, as...Louis wanted to live as a man."¹⁰⁶

After being absolved of the paternity suit due to what court physicians described as "pseudo-hermaphroditism and inguino-scrotal hernia," Louis was admitted to a Philadelphia psychiatric ward and placed under observation. There, doctors debated whether the patient "should be considered a homosexual female, especially [given reports]...that [he] menstruated and experienced monthly breast tenderness and malaise."¹⁰⁷ (It should be noted that Louis himself denied these claims.) Despite their lingering suspicions, however, doctors ultimately decided to "convert Louis into a male," reasoning that though there existed the "possibility of this individual being psychologically a homosexual female...by making the patient male, *the perversion socially ceases to exist*."¹⁰⁸ This outcome, they added, would of course be "most desirable from the standpoint of the community."¹⁰⁹

As with Black intersex people throughout the 1800s, the genders of twentieth century patients like Louis served as sites of contention, with medical professionals claiming sole authority over how these individuals would be permitted to identify. Though in Louis' case some consideration was given to his desire to live as a man, his physicians' eventual, beseeching consent for him to do so was less an affirmation of the

¹⁰⁶ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1411.

¹⁰⁷ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1411.

¹⁰⁸ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1419.

¹⁰⁹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1419.

young man's self-gendering than a way to mitigate the subversive non-normativity he might otherwise represent.

This form of mitigation was not always enough to motivate doctors in the post-Emancipation years to heed the self-identifications of their subjects, however. In his notes on the case of a thirty-seven-year-old Black intersex man autopsied upon his death, a Dr. Milton Helpern of New York calls into question the subject's gender and expresses doubt about his ability to successfully engage in an intimate relationship. Despite the patient's widow explicitly attesting to the health of she and her late husband's sex life, Helpern chooses to fixate instead on the fact that the woman had never become pregnant, which he reads as an indication that his subject "was not actually a man."¹¹⁰

Having examined the cadaver—who had "been raised as a boy, lived as a man, and had been married for twenty-two years"—and finding "feminine breasts, soft skin, no beard...a hypospadiac penis, a uterus, cervix, vagina...ovary on one side, and an ovotestis,"¹¹¹ the doctor declared that the patient was not male and was in fact 'really' "more a woman than a man."¹¹² Given this, Helpern was adamant that his subject must necessarily have been deficient in carnal matters, and was not swayed by the wife's repeated assurances that their sexual relationship was "fine," that her husband "seemed masculine in his traits," and that "his libido and his conduct during coitus...seemed to be all right!"¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1206.

¹¹¹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1200.

¹¹² Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1209.

¹¹³ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1209.

Helpern was equally unmoved by the woman's* subsequent refusal to affirm his posthumous re-gendering of her husband by confirming his hypothesis that the man in question “must have”¹¹⁴ menstruated. As the person being studied was deceased and could not speak to his own experiences—and since the words of his wife were discounted entirely—this case underscores the ways stories about Black intersex people were routinely being penned, in the years following the American Civil War, by those invested in rendering these figures as accessible, excessive, and subject to external interpretation. Often, the input of the individuals themselves was neither requested nor honored.

This reality shaped the experiences of Black intersex women*, who continued in the first part of the twentieth century to be viewed as coded-as-queer social threats as well as useful objects of study. Both perceptions underlie two New York physicians' 1917 description of a former patient who had previously undergone extended observation. Their subject—a Black, fifteen-year-old young woman* named Betty—had initially come under their care when she sought treatment for “‘ulcerative affections of the external genitals,’ which she attributed to a rape four months prior.”¹¹⁵ After medicating her with mercury and iodide for several weeks, the clinicians shifted focus to Betty's “atypical genital presentation,”¹¹⁶ which was marked by the presence of a small penis, a vagina, and a cervix. Intrigued, the pair “spent the next six months examining [Betty's] physical and psychological health.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1209.

¹¹⁵ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1090.

¹¹⁶ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1083.

¹¹⁷ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1083.

However, the doctors' interest in documenting the young woman's* movements and mapping her lived reality seemed to conflict (to the point of becoming irreconcilable) with their investment in projecting their own racial assumptions onto the patient, sometimes even dismissing her direct accounts as a result. The physicians' description of Betty as "a dark negress of low intellectual type...[whose] mental faculties cannot be called subnormal for the class and type that she represents,"¹¹⁸ for example, is emblematic of the anti-Black, openly eugenicist frame from which the two doctors' assessments would proceed. This frame limited their ability to ascribe validity to Betty's medical and personal disclosures.

Even the circumstances surrounding the sexual assault that initially prompted the young woman* to seek medical attention were subjected to these racist logics, with the physicians speculating that "her stories of rape by a white man only some months ago as her first sexual experience do not seem likely to be true in an individual of her race and age; sexual life usually begins much earlier."¹¹⁹ That the two clinicians expressed doubt about Betty having made it to the age of fifteen without engaging in sexual activity signals *both* the persistence of long-standing myths about Black women's* sexuality *and* the ongoing association of intersexuality with duplicitousness and promiscuity, both within and outside of the medical field.

These assumptions were compounded by ways Betty's physicians dismissed her accounts of not only her sexual experience but also her sexual preferences, prioritizing

¹¹⁸ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1091.

¹¹⁹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1091.

instead the testimony of outside observers and insisting that “[Betty’s] own words [had] to be taken with reserve.”¹²⁰ Though she told doctors that she was exclusively attracted to men, for instance, the two physicians administering her care deferred to a “nurse in the hospital ward [who said Betty] paid no attention to men, and instead ‘[was] very devoted to the females in the ward, fondling them whenever permitted and unchecked.’”¹²¹ The move to once again cast the young woman* as both (queerly) wanton and deceitful underscores the means by which intersex people’s bodies, pasts, and erotic realities were treated as matters of public debate, devoid of meaning and veracity until they had been filtered through a series of unerringly racist and misogynoiristic scripts.

In this, Betty’s case is emblematic of an ongoing anxiety about transgressive sexuality rooted in nineteenth century connotations of Black women* and queer desire. Psychologist Margaret Otis’ 1906 piece “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted” is indicative of this anxiety, as Otis maps the (she argues) common and well-known trend of “love-making between...white and colored girls” in “reform schools and institutions for delinquent[s].”¹²² At one such facility, Otis notes that “the love of ‘niggers’ seemed to be one of the traditions of the place,”¹²³ and that white students continued to pursue relationships with their Black counterparts even after administrative threats of punishment, seduced by the lure of “forbidden fruit.”¹²⁴ In many cases, white participants

¹²⁰ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1094.

¹²¹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1089.

¹²² Margaret Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (1906, 1913): 113.

¹²³ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

¹²⁴ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

in these illicit liaisons reported forming deep and lasting attachments to their lovers, with one girl writing “I might say I will give my Baby up, but ah, in my heart I love her and always shall.”¹²⁵

Despite this, Otis positions Black women* and girls as the initiators of these affairs, writing them into heteronormative scripts and marking them as masculine. She notes that one of her subjects admits upon questioning that “the colored girl she loved seemed the man, and [she] thought it was so in the case of the others;”¹²⁶ given this, Otis posits that within these cross-racial relationships, “the difference in color...[took] the place of difference in sex.”¹²⁷ The specter of sexually predatory Black aggressors targeting and corrupting white innocents haunts the researcher’s analytical imaginary, and shows up once again in patient notes about Betty. The notion of Black women*—particularly those with non-normative corporeal conformations—seizing the space of integrated institutions to fondle and lure co-inhabitants “whenever permitted and unchecked” worked to simultaneously undermine the potential deviance of white women and affirm the aberrance of Black ones.

Also compelling in Otis’ account is her equating of Black girls with both queer desire and primitivism. In documenting the customs characterizing interracial relationships between young women* at the school she observes, Otis writes:

An interesting feature of these love episodes is found in the many superstitious practices, especially among the colored when they wish to win the love of a white girl. Curious love charms are made of locks of hair of their inamoratas. One practice is for a colored girl to

¹²⁵ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 115.

¹²⁶ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 114.

¹²⁷ Otis, “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted,” 113.

bury a lock of hair of the white girl she fancies and this is sure to bring her love. These practices, some of so coarse a nature that they cannot be written down, seem to be part of the system, for system it must be called, so thoroughly ingrained it is in the school life.¹²⁸

This passage is particularly notable because while Otis writes of white students' participation in these affairs as manifestations of boredom or peer pressure, she frames Black girls' investment as a kind of coarseness, a uniquely racialized backwardness. She explains that in these relationships, "the animal instinct is seen to be paramount," borrowing from late-nineteenth century ideas of Black women* as "anomalous 'throwbacks' within a scheme of cultural and anatomical progress."¹²⁹ These women's* bodies were intrinsically marked as inferior, Otis seems to be arguing, and their proximity to queerness affirmed that inferiority.

For Black intersex women* in particular, these perceptions were exacerbated by medical depictions of them as nature's "half-steps, the between-beings."¹³⁰ In 1890, over two decades before Betty's extended stay in the New York hospital where she would go on to be extensively examined and (metaphorically) dissected, biologists Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson decisively declared that "hermaphroditism is primitive," adding that "the present cases of hermaphroditism"—cases like Betty's—"imply either persistence or reversion."¹³¹ Black non-dimorphic women*, then, served not only as the space where questions of non-normative gender and sexuality were litigated, but also as

¹²⁸ Otis, "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted," 116.

¹²⁹ Somerville, "Scientific Racism," 256.

¹³⁰ Somerville, "Scientific Racism," 259.

¹³¹ Somerville, "Scientific Racism," 255.

the necessary contradistinction by which the white cis, heterosexual, somatic norm acquired and sustained its validity. That is, the “process of mediating the self, of reflecting the self, through the body of the Black Other”¹³² cast Black intersexuality as a kind of useful fiction, the locus of queerness, regression, and abnormality it was possible and necessary to locate safely elsewhere.

This impulse likely explains, at least in part, WPA writer Irene Robertson’s exaggerated response to her interviewee Josie Martin’s non-normative physical appearance. Via her embodiment of coded-as-masculine attributes (baldness, shaving, etc.), Martin occupied a space of physical crypticity that ultimately prompted her designation as hapless and duplicitous. Her deviation from the types of gender performances Robertson would have found discernible rendered Josie not just unintelligible, but unimaginable, as that which demanded the explication of Irene’s intrusive, lightly chiding author’s note.

That Robertson would seek to contest her subject’s attempt to narrate her own experience is unsurprising, as Robertson’s tendency to editorialize often reflected a kind of paternalistic condescension that lessened her ability to meet respondents on their own terms. After recording the life history of fellow Arkansan Betty Krump, who—like Josie Martin—had been born to a formerly enslaved mother, Robertson added the following postscript to her notes:

This old woman lives in among the white population and rents the house next to her own to a white family. The lady down at the corner store said she tells white people, the younger ones, to call her Mrs. Krump. She didn’t pull that on me. She once told this

¹³² Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 23.

white lady storekeeper to call her Mrs. No one told me about her, because the lady said they all know she is impudent talking. She is old, black, wealthy, and arrogant.¹³³

It is unclear what all Robertson is attributing to impudence on Betty's part, but the matter of the older Black woman* insisting on being addressed as 'Mrs. Krump' is clearly a sticking point. It is likely that the interviewer was also both uncomfortable with and unprepared for the ways her subject insisted on speaking to her experiences in ways Irene would likely have found incensing.

Early on in the transcript, Krump recounts "I'm so glad the Yankees come. They so pretty. I love 'em."¹³⁴ When asked how she knew which soldiers were 'Yankees,' Betty adds, "Whah me? I can tell 'em by the way they talk and acts. You ain't none. You don't talk like 'em. You don't act like 'em. I watched you yeste'd'y. You don't walk like 'em. You act like the rest of these Southern women to me."¹³⁵ With this, Betty was returning Robertson's gaze; while many of the narratives feature detailed descriptions of interviewees (many of which are rife with negative racial stereotypes), WPA participants were rarely permitted space to render assessments of their own. Krump's 'impudent talking'—or rather, talking *back*—represents a reclamation and a rebuff. Rather than allowing Irene Robertson to set the tone, Betty insisted on taking part in the ways she and her past would ultimately be represented.

¹³³ Betty Krump, interview with Irene Robertson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*.

¹³⁴ Betty Krump, interview with Irene Robertson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*.

¹³⁵ Betty Krump, interview with Irene Robertson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*.

Josie Martin makes a similar move in her interview with Robertson, despite the latter woman's attempt to portray Martin as a tragic figure, rendered unmarriageable by her divergence from normative femininity and her potential intersexuality. The self-described healer discusses her romantic history without rancor, pushing against the framing of her lack of matrimonial attachment as a form of failure. "I wasn't popular with men," she explains, adding "I never danced."¹³⁶ This fact seems to cause her little distress, however; in fact, Josie discusses her marital status as a kind of "independence"—one in which she takes great pleasure—and describes her delight in being able to "make [her] money [and] go and spend it as she [sees] fit."¹³⁷ In this way, Josie marked her body, her life, and her divergence from cisheteronormative gender not as manifestations of pathology, but rather spaces of opportunity.

Mapping the means by which women* like Martin undertook this process of reframing requires being "concerned less with intersexuality as an epistemological object of study (i.e., what intersexuality *is* and *has been*) and more with the ideological, political, and conceptual work that intersexuality *does*, in both its material and its figural and tropological dimensions."¹³⁸ In other words, grappling with the specter of intersexuality as it has been read onto Black bodies (whether or not those bodies were characterized by ambiguous conformations) and the ways Black women* have contended

¹³⁶ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

¹³⁷ Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

¹³⁸ Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 6.

with, moved within, and resisted these projections allows for an “examin[ation of] what [Malatino calls] queer corporealities: bodies that don’t cohere according to cis-centric, sexually dimorphic...conceptions of somatic normalcy.”¹³⁹ Centering these women’s* embrace of gender possibility in the years leading up to and immediately following Emancipation—rather than hegemonic narratives informed largely by white gatekeepers’ externalized fears, desires, and expectations—creates space for more capacious interpretive possibilities.

CONCLUSION

In their 1917 observations of Betty from New York, physicians found themselves faced with a seemingly irreconcilable challenge to their notions of the normative. The patient’s apparent possession of both a penis and a clitoris confounded the clinical team, who conceded that “though they could not call her a true hermaphrodite, ‘which [was] so rare as to be almost unrecorded in the literature on the subject,’ they suggested that she could hardly be any closer.”¹⁴⁰ Despite medical insistence throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on treating bodies—particularly those of Black women*—as knowable entities, readily classified by skilled professionals, subjects like Betty who defied overly simplistic (that is, ableist, racialized, and cisnormative) categorizations stymied researchers. The young woman’s* doctors, “in their compulsion to choose one sex or the other...confronted the very inconsistencies...they had hoped to avoid by

¹³⁹ Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1094.

insisting on a rigid binary of male or female.”¹⁴¹ Amidst their fraught attempts to make sense of Betty, her own understandings of self were, at best, openly ignored and, at worst, actively negated.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, however, Black women* in the years leading up to and following Emancipation found ways to circumvent these imposed narratives and lay claim to their own complex realities. These individuals resisted attempts to delimit their corporeal and presentational possibilities, seizing the space of gender as a realm of opportunity, where the cisheteronormative was rethought and at times even outright rejected—a space where Black women’s* bodies became sites of (a necessarily circumscribed) kind of queer agency.

¹⁴¹ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, Location 1094-1102.

Chapter Two: “She Used To Take The Place Of A Cowboy:” Gender Policing, Plasticity, and Pleasure

In October of 1868, the U.S. Army recruit known as William Cathay (or Cathay) was honorably discharged from duty on the basis of disability. Since enlisting approximately two years prior, Cathay’s military service had been punctuated by a slew of medical setbacks, likely stemming from—as biographer DeAnne Blanton speculates—an undiagnosed case of mild diabetes that rendered the soldier especially susceptible to disease. In February of 1867, less than a year after enlistment, Cathay was “in an unnamed St. Louis hospital, suffering an undocumented illness”¹⁴² before being re-hospitalized several times over the next sixteen months for “itch,” “rheumatism,” and finally “neuralgia.”¹⁴³ All told, William’s stint in the military would end up including stays in “four hospitals, on five separate occasions, for varying amounts of time”¹⁴⁴—a fact that might ostensibly explain the Army’s eventual decision to issue a discharge. Cathay’s own purported account of the incident, however, tells a very different story.

Raised enslaved near Independence, Missouri in the years leading up to the American Civil War, the individual who would come to serve as William Cathay was born Cathay Williams, a “house servant on a . . . plantation on the outskirts of Jefferson City.”¹⁴⁵ After Emancipation, Williams altered her name and—for reasons that are not

¹⁴² DeAnne Blanton, “Cathay Williams: Black Woman Soldier 1866-1868,” *Buffalo Soldier*, Originally Published 1992, <https://www.buffalosoldier.net/CathayWilliamsFemaleBuffaloSoldierWithDocuments.htm>.

¹⁴³ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

¹⁴⁴ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

¹⁴⁵ Lyndon A. Bilal, “Cathay Williams, A Female Buffalo Soldier,” *Muslim Journal* (2017): 8.

immediately evident—enlisted with the newly formed, all-Black 38th Infantry. Following a brief military career distinguished by little other than her frequent bouts of illness, Cathay is reported to have told an interviewer that, rather than being released from service due to doubts about her ability to serve, “The post surgeon found out [she] was a woman,” after which she was quickly discharged. Williams added, “The men all wanted to get rid of me after they found out I was a woman. Some of them acted real bad to me.”¹⁴⁶

This mistreatment would extend into Williams’ later life, when ongoing, abject poverty compelled the former soldier to expose herself once again to U.S. military bureaucracy, this time in hopes of securing the army pension to which she, as a documented veteran, was entitled. She filed her request in June of 1891 after a nearly year-and-a-half-long stay in a Trinidad, Colorado hospital likely depleted her funds and made it all but impossible for her to pursue work as a laundress, as she had in earlier days. In her application, Williams “claimed...that she was suffering deafness, contracted in the army. She also referred to her rheumatism and neuralgia [and] declared eligibility for an invalid pension because she could no longer sustain herself by manual labor.”¹⁴⁷ Shortly thereafter, Williams was examined by a medical doctor (of uncertain competence), employed by the Pension Bureau, who subsequently submitted a report that minimized and at times outright denied the existence of Cathay’s self-reported physical ailments. The physician conceded that all the toes on both of Williams’ feet had been

¹⁴⁶ Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

¹⁴⁷ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

amputated and therefore “she could only walk with the aid of a crutch,” but declared that she was otherwise in “good general health” and “gave his opinion as ‘nil’ on a disability rating.”¹⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, the Pension Bureau followed suit in February of 1892, rejecting Williams’ claim “on medical grounds, [insisting] that no disability existed”¹⁴⁹ despite ample evidence to the contrary. Though Williams’ file appears to contain neither an explicit rebuke of her years-long act of gender subversion nor any other “derogatory remarks,”¹⁵⁰ the Army’s refusal to approve Cathay’s pension request and thereby tacitly validate her military service might be interpreted as an indictment of the ways antebellum and postbellum Black women* like Williams often engaged gender as a space of fluidity and vicissitude, in spite of external attempts to police these transgressive engagements. Contextualizing these individuals’ narratives requires “read[ing] in the interstices of [their] histor[ies], trying to find the possibility for Black queer subjectivity”¹⁵¹ within stories of persistence, paucity, plasticity, and pleasure.

PLASTICITY

In his *Ebony Magazine* profile of Mary Fields, long revered for her stint as “the first known African American woman star route mail carrier in the United States”¹⁵² (a

¹⁴⁸ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

¹⁴⁹ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

¹⁵⁰ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

¹⁵¹ Matt Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (2003): 72.

¹⁵² Miantae Metcalf McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, on the Stage, Behind the Badge*, edited by Bruce A. Glasrud, Michael N. Searles, and Albert S. Broussard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016): 149.

distinction that earned her the nickname Stagecoach Mary), actor Gary Cooper describes Fields as “one of the freest souls ever to draw a breath or a .38.”¹⁵³ This characterization is a perplexing one, both because the formerly enslaved woman* Cooper biographies was born into captivity long before the onset of the American Civil War *and* because so much of her post-Emancipation existence was marked by a mutable yet consistent set of unfreedoms.

Following years of transition and migration, Mary Fields found herself, toward the turn of the twentieth century, living in the Montana town of Cascade. She had moved to the developing Territory in earlier days to rejoin her long-time companion, Mother Mary Amadeus, and to take up residence in the nun’s fledgling mission (a decision discussed at length in this text’s final chapter); however, by this time Amadeus had since relocated, and Fields had been left to fend for herself as Cascade’s sole Black inhabitant. She was initially able to sustain something of a public life by “socializing in [local] saloons [and] jawing with the local men”¹⁵⁴—an option to which few women in her new chosen home had access—but soon enough even this most minor of liberties would become a point of contention.

After Cascade’s incorporation in the early 1900s and subsequent mayoral election, the new city government “wasted no time”¹⁵⁵ in drafting legislation to prevent Mary from continuing to engage in non-normative forms of sociality. Among the dozen

¹⁵³ Gary Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary: A Gun-Toting Black Woman Delivered the U.S. Mail in Montana,” *Ebony* (1977): 96.

¹⁵⁴ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 157.

¹⁵⁵ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 160.

or so ordinances passed in early 1911 was one that reportedly read, “No member of the female sex has the right to smoke or drink liquor in a public place. No woman *of any race* will be allowed to enter any drinking establishment in Cascade for any purpose, from this time forward”¹⁵⁶ [emphasis mine]. That the language of race features prominently in the legislation indicates that the framers’ intent was to specifically target Fields for exclusion, though there was likely more at play than solely racial antagonism. Mary’s position as a transgressive figure in Cascade extended beyond her presence in an otherwise racially homogenous town and was further cemented by both her nebulous relationship with another woman (Amadeus) as well as her complex relationship to gender.

Infamous for her physical strength, frequent donning of ‘men’s attire,’ and pursuit of traditionally masculine interests, Mary Fields represented a form of gender creativity that undoubtedly would have been viewed “as a threat to...respectability.”¹⁵⁷ Although Stagecoach Mary lore maintains that Fields was lauded for her hard-drinking, fast-shooting ways, the tensions she was forced to navigate after moving to Montana reflect a far different reality. In spite of these legal and societal sanctions, however, Mary Fields and other Black women* like her, in the years leading up to and following Emancipation, resisted attempts to delimit their corporeal and presentational possibilities.

Attending to this resistance allows for evaluation of the ways antebellum and postbellum Black women* were making sense of themselves in relation to (and outside

¹⁵⁶ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 160.

¹⁵⁷ Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies,” 64.

of) the prevailing gender conventions of the era. In her work *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80*, Marli F. Weiner posits that enslaved (and formerly enslaved) African American women* often sought in vain to “mimic” the gender norms of their mistresses, donning hoopskirts and at times even adopting planter courtship rituals. Weiner contends that while Black women* confronting “the ideology of domesticity”—perhaps inevitably—were fated to fall short of attainment, they still looked to “plantation mistresses for...example[s] of what the...expression of [true] womanhood could mean.”¹⁵⁸ This framing conflicts, however, with the means by which Black women* in the antebellum and postbellum years were self-making in ways that were not determined by and, in some cases, stood in opposition to the tenets of ‘true’ nineteenth century womanhood.

To that end, the reminiscences of Missourian Rhody Holsell are particularly illuminative. Born seventeen years before the conclusion of the War, Holsell in her WPA interview recounts losing both of her parents prior to Emancipation and having to move from job to job in order to stay afloat after freedom. Upon ostensibly being asked whether she would be interested in receiving a federal pension, the now-widowed formerly enslaved woman* answered in the affirmative, but assured her interviewer that she did not intend to use the money to “roam around” or indulge in any of the “other excitement[s]” in which women* at the time were expected to engage; in fact, she added,

¹⁵⁸ Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998): 116.

“I don’t go to frolics of any kind.”¹⁵⁹ Further, far from looking to her former mistress “for example[s] of what the expression of womanhood could mean,” in terms of apparel, Rhody confesses “I don’t care nothing about clothes.”¹⁶⁰ Instead of attempting to embody hegemonic, postbellum gender mores already devised to exclude her, Holsell describes herself as standing at a distance from them, defying the expectations of not only the larger society but even her own late husband.

“My husband did not believe in women voting,” Rhody recollects, adding, “He said it would tear up [the] country.”¹⁶¹ In spite of this, Holsell guiltlessly admits, “I been votin’ at that thing ever since it started. Dey would take me a free ride when votin’ time comes...I always went my own way.”¹⁶² These memories highlight the means by which Rhody and other enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* like her navigated normativity and circumvented the strictures and impositions of proscriptive nineteenth century gender roles.

Texan Anne Clark makes many of the same narrative moves. Rapidly approaching the age of 112 at the time of her 1937 WPA interview, Clark retains detailed memories of her life in bondage, which began in Mississippi long before the War. Enslaved by two different men before eventually being emancipated, Anne remembers being forced by one of her “marsters...[to do] the hardest work ever a man did.”¹⁶³ Clark

¹⁵⁹ Rhody Holsell, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

¹⁶⁰ Rhody Holsell, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

¹⁶¹ Rhody Holsell, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

¹⁶² Rhody Holsell, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

¹⁶³ Anne Clark, *WPA Slave Narrative Project, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1*.

seems to regard her ability to perform this labor, however, as a point of pride rather than an emblem of failed femininity. “I ploughed, hoed, split rails,” she explains, adding “I was so strong.”¹⁶⁴ Like Rhody Holsell, Anne expresses little interest in the sort of vestimentary practices that may have more closely aligned her with the era’s gender norms, telling her interviewer “Don’t [bring] me anything fine to wear for my birthday. I jus’ wan’ some candy.”¹⁶⁵

For some antebellum and postbellum Black women*, these rejections extended beyond styling practices and into the realm of the corporeal. In her WPA interview, Arkansan Sarah Smiley—born in 1860 to two formerly enslaved parents—describes her adolescent embrace of what in the contemporary moment might be considered an act of binding. “When my breasts began to grow,” she explains, “I didn’t want those bumps on me, and tied them down with wide rags.”¹⁶⁶ Though Smiley’s recitation of this particular memory, much like the rest of her narrative, is delivered in a succinct, matter-of-fact manner, it is laden with possibility. Sarah—along with her contemporaries Rhody Holsell and Anne Clark—imagined their stakes in womanhood as being characterized by expansiveness and opportunity rather than the limits of pre- and post-Emancipation cisheteronormativity. These individuals claimed their bodies, movement, interests, and even their clothing as sites of gender creativity wherein the liminal was not only practicable, but preferable.

¹⁶⁴ Anne Clark, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

¹⁶⁵ Anne Clark, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

¹⁶⁶ Sarah Smiley, interview with Martin & Barker, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 6.

Examining these (re)clamations allows for a parsing of the polysemous gender performances of individuals like Harriet Tubman. Known by the time of her death as a famed activist and abolitionist revolutionary, Tubman was born enslaved in Dorchester County, Maryland and later escaped to Philadelphia. She then embarked on a lifetime of service that included over a dozen return trips South to liberate the enslaved, a stint as a Union army scout, and eventually a founding role in an Auburn, New York ‘home for the aged.’ Despite her rich history, however, the complexity with which she embodied and performed gender is often re-scripted into something more immediately intelligible or—more often than not—entirely ignored. Janell Hobson points to this trend in her piece “Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance,” positing, “Tubman’s contributions to gender liberation go unnoticed and unrecognized in much of present-day women’s studies scholarship and curricula”¹⁶⁷—an omission emblematic of the ways Black enslaved and formerly enslaved women’s* gender creativity is often only rendered legible once it has been funneled through re-interpretive and ultimately limiting perceptual frames.

These frames typically take one of two forms. In the first, the issue of Tubman’s distance from normative or aspirational femininity is reconciled by removing Tubman from the category of womanhood entirely. Through this lens, “Tubman is...embraced by being treated as so unusual as to be without equal and then folded into masculinist black history frameworks. Rendered an anomalous black heroine, she is then incorporated into an androcentric narrative of black history: Tubman...is lauded in such contexts by

¹⁶⁷ Janell Hobson, “Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance,” *Meridians* 12 (2014): 1.

zeroing in on only some aspects of her life story, particularly those that align effortlessly with androcentric notions of protest.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, those grappling with Tubman’s gendered crypticity routinely do so by discussing her as if she were literally a (cis) man rather than contending with her nuanced presentational plasticity. Hobson notes that often, “[Tubman’s] story follows a militant trajectory that makes her...an honorary masculine subject in African American history. Such ‘masculine’ tropes enable Tubman to meet...‘a standard of greatness derived from male experience’”¹⁶⁹ while simultaneously moving her to the periphery.

Perhaps paradoxically, the other form of rescripting applied to stories about Harriet Tubman relies on strategies by which Tubman’s “radical acts [and practices] are...made ‘safer’” by turning her “into a nurturing figure, maternalized...as one of the most popular heroines of the elementary school set.”¹⁷⁰ By positioning ‘Mother Tubman’ as loving parent, benevolently ushering her flock to freedom, the implications of her persistent unconventionality are adequately contained. Perhaps at least partially in response to the ‘folding’ of Tubman into “masculinist black history frameworks,” biographers attempting to defend the figure have posited that “her femaleness was not questioned despite her obvious physical strength: Tubman’s petite frame and beautiful

¹⁶⁸ Vivian M. May, “Under-Theorized and Under-Taught: Re-examining Harriet Tubman’s Place in Women’s Studies,” *Meridians* 12 (2014): 31.

¹⁶⁹ Janell Hobson, “Between History and Fantasy: Harriet Tubman in the Artistic and Popular Imaginary,” *Meridians* 12 (2014): 57.

¹⁷⁰ May, “Under-Theorized and Under-Taught,” 37.

singing voice gave the lie to any taunts of masculinity.”¹⁷¹ Neither of these constructions, however, fully account for the generative possibilities individuals like Tubman represent.

The second of these two faux-corrective strategies, used to rhetorically “tame” Tubman, is fully realized in the frontispiece for Sarah H. Bradford’s *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*,¹⁷² published in 1869. In the sketch, Tubman is posed before a distant row of tents (presumably those of a Union army camp), her body and face angled slightly away from the viewer. Her facial features have been notably softened (as have the contours of her wiry frame through the swaddling of her body in baggy, ill-fitting garb).

Though Tubman is portrayed wielding her signature shotgun (an act of defiance in and of itself given the social climate of Reconstruction-era America), even this fact is palliated by the weapon’s pointed decentralization—the butt of the firearm rests propped among the grass, its muzzle covered by Tubman’s hands and its barrel all but lost in the folds of her skirt. Far from seeking to depict her as the “border-crossing migrant”¹⁷³ affectionately known as Black Moses by her friends and admirers, the artist of this piece works to situate their subject as Mother Tubman, an assuaging presence threatening only to the now-defunct institution of chattel slavery, but never to the cisheteronormative status quo.

Paul Collins’ portrait *Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad*, on the other hand—in depicting the eponymous heroine as active agent rather than passive device—

¹⁷¹ Hobson, “Between History and Fantasy,” 57.

¹⁷² Sarah Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York: W. J. Moses, Printer, 1869).

¹⁷³ Hobson, “Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance,” 3.

performs a very different kind of labor, offering insight into how grappling with the figure's non-normative gender performance might look. In the painting, Tubman's shotgun once again makes an appearance, although this time in a raised, ready-to-fire position beside its carrier's crouched and vigilant frame. Harriet's left arm is stretched behind her in wordless warning to the huddled mass at her heels, and her head is topped with a wide-brimmed hat designed to protect her from the elements. Rather than strive to dilute Tubman's image in order to more easily accommodate the patriarchal norms it would ordinarily impend, Collins' portrayal speaks to the myriad ways Tubman worked throughout her life to, as Hobson puts it:

...remind [Black] women that if she, a woman, could transgress the raced and gendered limitations that forbade women from navigating the world and freely crossing the borders between North and South, Canada and the United States—and to do so without a man's help—if she, a woman, could lead a successful battle during the Civil War, then surely [African American] women deserved the right...to full citizenship.¹⁷⁴

The claiming of this citizenship—in the case of Tubman and other formerly enslaved Black women*—included the tacit apprehending of the conceptual space necessary to flout hegemonic norms within a context devised to disallow for heterogeneity. As Vivian May points out, “The...rhetorics and...lenses frequently applied to Tubman [and those like her] ignore much painstaking research that has been done to render visible less overt, though equally persistent, forms of gendered resistance within the contexts of slavery.”¹⁷⁵ As the cisheteronormative means of analyzing these

¹⁷⁴ Hobson, “Harriet Tubman: A Legacy of Resistance,” 4.

¹⁷⁵ May, “Under-Theorized and Under-Taught,” 33.

figures are rethought, it becomes possible to view them neither as ‘honorary’ men nor inferior women, but rather fully fleshed, complexly gendered individuals.

Part of this rethinking entails mapping the borders women* like Tubman traversed, geographically and otherwise. In *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley argues that, in her numerous sojourns into and out of the South, Tubman entered and indeed created “spaces of possibility for...female masculinities enabled by migratory movements.”¹⁷⁶ The boundaries she crossed, then, were not merely physical but ontological as well; her movements away from enslavement, through the nineteenth century U.S. landscape, and between conventional notions of masculinity and femininity underscore “the importance of trans- histories of migration: that is, of opening intersectional—literally trans— analyses of how sex, gender, sexuality, class, race, and nationality pressure each other in the cross- gender practices that occur during relocation.”¹⁷⁷

This lens is useful in analyzing the literature surrounding Mary Fields, whose life history has long been subjected to the same fruitless dichotomies as Harriet Tubman’s. In his *Ebony* profile of the figure, for example, Gary Cooper explains that “Mary acted as mascot for the Cascade baseball team for several years...[and] would punch any man in the mouth who talked against the team.”¹⁷⁸ In addition to eliding any discussion of the

¹⁷⁶ Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 181.

¹⁷⁷ Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*, 181.

¹⁷⁸ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 102.

animosities she faced while filling this role,¹⁷⁹ Cooper's anecdote is used once again to frame Mary—somewhat myopically—as one of the boys. In fact, team photos from this period show Fields posed alongside the (all-male) team she served, too ambiguous to be read as achieving normative womanhood, unable to be understood as the liminal figure she was, and thus rendered a marginal, 'honorary' man.

Later in this same article, Cooper seems to walk back this characterization and pivots to one that instead maternalizes Fields. "In her later years," he recalls, "[Fields] worked as a babysitter for \$1.50 a day and then would spend the money buying goodies for her charges."¹⁸⁰ Far from the gun-slinging, hard-drinking figure Cooper describes at the outset of his piece, this version of 'Stagecoach Mary' seemingly serves as a facile attempt to situate Fields within the familiar in order to lessen the impact of her divergence. This failure "to look at gender as a mutable category"¹⁸¹ represents a missed opportunity—one that renders "gender-transgressive people" like Tubman and Fields "vanishing figures in both Black historical and queer historical contexts."¹⁸²

This impulse, to essentially make the gender insurgent vanish, was perhaps at the root of Fields' eventual expulsion from the Montana mission that, in earlier days, she herself had helped to build. Though accounts of the incident preceding her unceremonious removal vary widely, most describe some version of a heated altercation

¹⁷⁹ McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom, 158-159.

¹⁸⁰ Cooper, "Stagecoach Mary," 102.

¹⁸¹ Richardson, "No More Secrets, No More Lies," 67.

¹⁸² Richardson, "No More Secrets, No More Lies," 68.

with a hired hand “who was angry that he had to take orders from a black woman.”¹⁸³ After an argument in which the worker reportedly struck Fields, the latter “reached for her pistol, and fired at him.”¹⁸⁴ Shortly after, Reverend Bishop Brondel, who years before had assumed authority over the Montana Ursuline Motherhouse where Fields had come to live and where this shootout ultimately occurred, sent a letter to Mother Amadeus instructing her “to dismiss Mary Fields immediately,” citing “allegations of Mary’s unsavory hostility.”¹⁸⁵ Though the bishop refused, when confronted by Fields directly, to elaborate on these nebulous allegations, it is perhaps safe to assume that much of what was attributed to Mary Fields as hostility was her unwillingness to conform to normative standards of comportment, from the fact that she regularly “smoked cigars, drank from a whiskey jug, [and] carried a gun”¹⁸⁶ to her (not infrequent) confrontation of “any male that tried to trample on her rights and privileges.”¹⁸⁷

Stagecoach Mary lore is rife with tales describing just this sort of confrontation. A particularly illustrative one reportedly took place after Fields’ abrupt exodus from the mission, during a period in which she was making a living as a laundress in Cascade. While socializing in a local saloon, Fields spotted a customer who had yet to provide payment for services rendered, which prompted her to follow him “up the street, [grab] him by the shirt collar, [and knock] him down with her fist.”¹⁸⁸ The satisfaction of doing

183 Walsh, “Fields, Stagecoach Mary,” 1.

184 Walsh, “Fields, Stagecoach Mary,” 1.

185 McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 154.

186 Walsh, “Fields, Stagecoach Mary,” 2.

187 William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1971): 156.

188 Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 102.

so, Fields is said to have later told her drinking friends, was enough to settle the bill.¹⁸⁹ (Her exact words, according to Cooper's account, were "his laundry bill is paid.")¹⁹⁰ That this event took place in a saloon is notable, as Fields was known to have requested (and been granted) special permission to drink in these establishments with men, even after the 1911 ordinance was passed barring women in Cascade from doing so.¹⁹¹

Such stories, rather than being read as indications of her complex relationship to gender, are often told to position Mary Fields as anomalous, without equal—to, in effect, fold her into "an androcentric narrative of...history" that is unable to contend with the duality the figure represents. What might potentially be gained from thinking of Fields *not* as one of a kind, but rather as one in a long lineage of African American enslaved and formerly enslaved women* who lived at the intersections, who embraced and indeed embodied ambiguity, who existed as both and neither? By all accounts, Fields was *both* a whiskey-swilling, rifle-wielding protector of Ursuline nuns *and* a neighborhood caretaker who made bouquets for the local athletes using flowers from her own garden,¹⁹² just as her contemporary Harriet Tubman was *both* Black Moses, the fearless revolutionary who made over a dozen return trips to the South after her own initial escape to liberate the enslaved *and* a petite figure with a "beautiful singing voice." Understanding these dyads not as contradictions but rather as insights into the totality of such individuals allows for their gendered liminality to catalyze an ideological pivot toward more diverse and

¹⁸⁹ Katz, *The Black West*, 156.

¹⁹⁰ Cooper, "Stagecoach Mary," 102.

¹⁹¹ McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom."

¹⁹² McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom."

expansive investigations into the past. These women*, in an era marked by an idealized model of femininity that was both exclusionary and repressive, imagined the category of womanhood capaciously—as a space that allowed for performances of audacity, masculinity, and opacity.

PLEASURE

In December of 1848, enslaved Georgians Ellen and William Craft successfully fled their respective plantations and migrated north to Philadelphia—an experience detailed at length in their autobiography *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft*, published in 1860. Eight days prior to their arrival in Pennsylvania, “a plan [of escape] suggested itself”¹⁹³ to the Crafts (though the origin of this plan, notably, remains a point of dispute), and the two devised a strategy to travel by train across several slave states into free territory. Ellen, who was “nearly white”¹⁹⁴ in appearance, disguised herself as a disabled white man of means, purchased train tickets for herself and William, and posed as her husband’s enslaver so that the (ostensibly interracial) pair could travel together without raising suspicion. Interestingly, however, despite Ellen’s centrality to the Crafts’ liberatory pursuits, the account of these events in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* often works to undermine her agency, at times in revealing ways.

¹⁹³ Ellen Craft and William Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001; 1860): Location 15.

¹⁹⁴ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 261.

Though printings of the text tend to grant the couple writing credits as a collective, William is the sole narrator of the piece and is thus the only voice the reader is permitted to hear, effectively rendering Ellen silent—an especially telling detail given that it was only through Ellen’s “disguis[ing] herself as an invalid gentleman”¹⁹⁵ and thereby procuring their train tickets North that the two were able to make their escape. Seemingly aware of—and perhaps threatened by—the extent to which his liberty was predicated on his wife’s gender digressions, William framed their narrative so as to not only recount the events of their deliverance from bondage, but also to (re)position Ellen safely within the bounds of accepted (and acceptable) femininity. This framing left little space to consider the possibility that “queer expressions of gender and sexuality—or deviations from Western norms thereof,” like those undertaken by Ellen Craft, could be and often were “critical resources of liberation, resistance, and even pleasure.”¹⁹⁶

In “Not Killing Me Softly: African American Women, Slave Revolts, and Historical Constructions of Racialized Gender,” Rebecca Hall outlines the ways figures like William Craft, “in response to the [common] critique that African American gender roles were (and therefore are) pathological...employed the tropes of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as defined by the dominant culture”¹⁹⁷ in order to reify the ostensible fixity of traditional gender norms and—perhaps as a corrective to histories of racist exclusion—

¹⁹⁵ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 261.

¹⁹⁶ Christopher S. Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed: Queer Gender and Resistance to Slavery,” *African American Review* 52 (2019): 342.

¹⁹⁷ Rebecca Hall, “Not Killing Me Softly: African American Women, Slave Revolts, and Historical Constructions of Racialized Gender,” *The Freedom Center Journal* 1 (2009): 7.

move to position Black people within them. William’s intent to perform just this type of labor is evident nearly from the outset of his narrative, as he pointedly advances the claim that Ellen “had no ambition whatever to assume [her] disguise”¹⁹⁸ as a disabled white gentleman, and in fact initially “shrank from the idea.”¹⁹⁹ He insists that his wife would never have engaged in this furtive act of gender insurgency “had it been possible to have obtained...liberty by more simple means.”²⁰⁰ In so doing, William frames Ellen’s non-normative gender performance as solely a matter of necessity, refusing to allow for the possibility that Ellen may have found pleasure in the act, therefore asserting her normalcy and, by extension, protecting his own.

This narrative move conflicts, however, with alternative accounts of the Crafts’ escape, which credit Ellen with conceiving of “the entire plan, formulating each aspect of their fugitive plot in response to William’s skeptical questions, [and] propos[ing] to cut her hair”²⁰¹ rather than simply and reluctantly acceding to her husband’s subversive proposals. It also conflicts with William’s own recounting of his wife’s active and seemingly eager participation in crafting her masculine persona, Mr. William Johnson—most evident in the portions of the narrative where the Crafts are made to grapple with Ellen’s illiteracy and physical appearance.

¹⁹⁸ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 309.

¹⁹⁹ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 258.

²⁰⁰ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 309.

²⁰¹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 77.

Upon recalling that “it was customary for travellers to register their names in the visitors’ book at hotels”—which Ellen would not have been able to do—William explains that his wife “raised her head, and with a smile on her face...said, ‘I think I have it! [...] I think I can make a poultice and bind up my right hand in a sling, and with propriety ask the officers to register my name for me.’”²⁰² Later, when it “occurred to [Ellen] that the smoothness of her face might betray her...she decided to make another poultice, and put it in a white handkerchief to be worn under the chin, up the cheeks, and to tie over the head. This nearly hid the expression of the countenance, as well as the beardless chin.”²⁰³ These anecdotes cast doubt on “William’s description around...the plot’s authorship” elsewhere in the text, in which he “credits himself with conceiving [the Crafts’] elaborate plan for escape and describes how he had to convince his wife to join him.”²⁰⁴ It would appear, in fact, that Ellen was not only willing to enact the kind of gender digressions ultimately necessary to secure her and William’s freedom, but that she was vital in lending the performance plausibility and authenticity.

Further, despite William’s efforts to discursively diminish his wife’s extensive involvement in her own liberatory acts of transgression, it is key to note that the frontispiece for *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom* consists of a popular engraving of Ellen in which she dons the clothing and medical accoutrements of her alter ego, Mr. Johnson. Craft’s smirking masculine embodiment on the very first page of the book belies her

²⁰² Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 303.

²⁰³ Craft and Craft, *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom*, Location 303.

²⁰⁴ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 77-78.

husband's proceeding attempts, throughout the rest of the text, to prevent observers from reading a kind of queer pleasure onto her performances.

In his work *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, author Uri McMillan poses the question of who exactly this particular engraving is meant to depict—"Ellen, William's wife...or...Ellen in the disguises she used to pass as a white gentleman traveling with his black slave?"²⁰⁵ It seems possible, however, that these two options are not mutually exclusive—the Ellen being portrayed here, sporting a whimsical top hat and inscrutable smile, exists in this image as Craft's wife, a fugitive in disguise, *and* a Black woman* engaging in an (admittedly ephemeral) performance of masculinity she might otherwise be sanctioned for accessing. In other words, "despite the [widely] acknowledged ontological ambiguity of the image, [the prevailing tendency is to] position the engraving's intentionality (and representation) in a binary" when in fact "the engraving's slipperiness proves a source of [intentional] befuddlement, if not contention."²⁰⁶ In reassuming her disguise and sitting for this portrait, Ellen was able to "actively participate in her own visual reproduction"²⁰⁷ by means which allowed her to lay claim to her agency even while being concurrently written out of her own story.

Nevertheless, subsequent depictions of the Crafts—produced after both the success of their book and the establishment of the two as regulars on the (American and,

²⁰⁵ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015): 86.

²⁰⁶ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 87.

²⁰⁷ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 88.

eventually, British) abolitionist lecture circuit—mirrored earlier efforts to impose normativity onto Ellen and effectively neutralize the multiple threats she represented. This is especially evident in a widely distributed pair of engravings depicting the Crafts, published in William Still's 1872 work *The Underground Railroad*.²⁰⁸ In them, the couple's faces are juxtaposed in a manner meant to write them back "into conventional gender roles."²⁰⁹ As McMillan details:

Facing the viewer's gaze head-on, both *dramatis personae* made visual claims to citizenship, using clothing as a potent and malleable signifier. While William was elegantly dressed in a suit jacket, crisp white shirt, and tie in his portrait, Ellen was dressed in a dark, high-collared garment and a bonnet wrapped around her head and tied at the neck. Both images, more in line with the tenets of classical portraiture than the engraving of Ellen in disguise, seem meant to emphasize a staged everydayness. Ellen Craft's engraving, though, also traffics in...gendered objectification...using sartorial cues to affirm her femininity.²¹⁰

The positioning of these images side-by-side forcibly distances Ellen from the racial boundary crossings foregrounded in earlier artistic renderings portraying her as Mr. William Johnson. That is, if the Crafts' escape narrative and Ellen's not-infrequent embodiment of her alter ego in abolitionist spaces constituted "performance[s] of white masculinity [that] disrupt[ed] assumptions regarding which bodies can use the vehicles of whiteness and masculinity to achieve a stated, and in this case antiracist, end,"²¹¹ then these later images work to combat that disruption. Though in the United Kingdom (where the Crafts eventually relocated after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850) "Ellen's

²⁰⁸ William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno Press, 1968).

²⁰⁹ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 78.

²¹⁰ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 91.

²¹¹ Lewis, "Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed," 344.

white aesthetic visually amplified the horrors of slavery” and served, for British audiences, as “further proof of the provincial brutality of their former colony,” in the context of the United States, her appearance “aired the taboo of miscegenation”²¹² and triggered deep-seeded racial anxieties, even amongst those sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. Ellen’s portrayal alongside her significantly less fair-skinned husband recoded her as African American, despite presenting as “phenotypically white,”²¹³ thereby allaying the fears of an audience eager to maintain clear racial boundaries—regardless of their political affiliations—and thus rendering Ellen’s message (and very existence) more palatable.

Further, in sharp contrast to the way she is styled in works depicting her as Mr. William Johnson, the Ellen depicted in this piece—with her “dark, high-collared” frock and elaborate bonnet—is framed as the conventionally and unquestionably feminine figure described in William Craft’s narration, with the artist “using sartorial cues to affirm [this] femininity.”²¹⁴ However, these attempts to redeem and reinscribe Ellen’s normativity manage neither to erase nor negate the insurgent impact of earlier images, which “help us reimagine resistance as...queer” and underscore the ways enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* at times “used their statuses as gender-fluid”—however fleeting—“to free themselves, to free others, and sometimes even to experience pleasure.”²¹⁵ Rather than regarding figures like Ellen Craft, then, as non-agential and

²¹² Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 76.

²¹³ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 92.

²¹⁴ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 91.

²¹⁵ Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 343.

resigned, engaging in acts of gender subversion solely as a last resort, it is generative to consider instead the incendiary enjoyment available to those undertaking these acts.

Such a lens proves useful in parsing the life and gender performances of formerly enslaved activist Sojourner Truth. Long revered for her compelling orations and extensive abolitionist work, Truth sought, often in highly publicized ways, to stake her own contested claim to a particular brand of nineteenth century womanhood—one that necessitated an expansive reimagining of the category itself. In written accounts of her “now iconic speech ‘Ar’n’t I A Woman,’” Truth positioned herself as consciously diverging from the era’s cult of true womanhood, commenting on her immense physical strength “not as a lamentation of her masculinity but as an interrogation of what defines both womanhood *and* masculinity. Her speech ask[ed] audience members to broaden their conception of womanhood to include Black people, muscled masculinity, and Black women’s masculine expression.”²¹⁶

This reclamation offers a striking contrast to the violent re-scriptings characterizing literary and artistic representations of Truth’s contemporary, Ellen Craft. Rather than seeking to assure spectators of her own investment in and performance of normative femininity as a means of establishing her humanity, Truth instead “confront[ed] this normative system by affirming her masculinity, womanhood, and personhood simultaneously...find[ing] in her own masculine expression a means of critiquing racist and sexist rhetoric.”²¹⁷ Interestingly, this confrontation can be read as not

²¹⁶ Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 341.

²¹⁷ Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 341-342.

only critical but pleasurable, as Truth appears to have ascribed both gratification and pride onto her liberated body, which she marked not a site of extraction but one of self-sufficiency and worth.

As an especially illuminative 1835 South Carolinian runaway slave ad demonstrates, nineteenth century Black people across the gender spectrum were staging similar reapprehensions of both their gender performances and, ultimately, themselves. Published widely at the behest of (likely enslaver) J.W. Clark, the advertisement consists of the author's plea for help in locating a self-liberated enslaved man named George, whom Clark describes as "a rather dark mulatto, about 18 years old, not very stout made, [and] a little knock-kneed."²¹⁸ Clark adds, "[George] walks and talks very pertly, and [is] quite a dandy in his dress."²¹⁹ This latter detail is notable, given that, as Elisa Glick points out, the figure of the black dandy "is indispensable to the formation of Afro-diasporic identity [since] dandies—high and low, masculine and effeminate, enslaved and freed, respectable and rebellious—[were] themselves a testament to the multiple and shifting articulations of blackness."²²⁰ Often positioned as simply mimicking white clothing conventions in search of hegemonic approval, in reality these individuals and their

²¹⁸ J.W. Clark, "\$1000 Reward," *Freedom on the Move*, Originally Published 1835, <https://app.freedomonthemove.org/advertisements/67c3012f-5cc1-44ac-b904-11c3d339d5da?limit=24&page=59>.

²¹⁹ Clark, "\$1000 Reward."

²²⁰ Elisa Glick, "Black Dandies in the Diaspora," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17 (2011): 426.

provocative, inherently queer²²¹ performances offer insight into the enslaved's multiple and nuanced deployments of agency.

J.W. Clark's attempts to deny George this very agency are numerous and revealing, as is evident in his limning of the escapee as beholden to the influence and desires of white men, even at the moment that he seizes his own liberation. "I will give [a one thousand dollar] reward," Clark writes, "for the apprehension and conviction of him who gave my servant boy George Free Papers, and induced him to quit my service."²²² It is telling that Clark imagines George's decision to run away as having necessarily been catalyzed by some duplicitous, unnamed actor rather than by George himself; it is possible that he held a similar view of George's dandyism, which Clark credits himself with facilitating through the dispensing of funds. "[George] will no doubt change [clothes] frequently," he explains, "as he had plenty of money when he left...He has been waiting on tables in Clark's hotel the last ten years."²²³ Working against this framing, George—in making his escape—(re)claimed his gender performances not as a source of entertainment for his enslaver's hotel guests nor a manifestation of J.W. Clark's self-congratulatory benevolence, but rather as a form of "Black [expansiveness that] threatened the status quo and evidenced a black creativity and resilience"²²⁴ that was, in this instance, literally liberatory.

²²¹ Glick, "Black Dandies in the Diaspora," 427.

²²² Clark, "\$1000 Reward."

²²³ Clark, "\$1000 Reward."

²²⁴ Monica L. Miller, "The Black Dandy," *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History: The Black Experience in the Americas*, edited by Colin A. Palmer (Farmington Hills: Cengage Gale, 2005): 258.

In this way, George's story is analogous to that of an enslaved Louisianan woman* named Mariah who, according to an 1837 runaway ad, fled her enslaver's New Orleans property in March of the previous year. The author of the advertisement, H.F. Wade, describes Mariah as "a negro girl...aged from 28 to 30 years, about five feet 4 or 5 inches in height, heavy made, a dark griffe,²²⁵ large mouth, and in the habit of laughing when spoken to."²²⁶ Wade adds, "[Mariah] speaks French a little, and is slightly pitted with the small pox. She will probably try to pass herself off as...a boy, as she has frequently dressed herself in boy's clothes, and has her hair cut short for the purpose."²²⁷ That the escaped individual's practice of "dress[ing] herself in boy's clothes" and wearing her hair short is positioned as habitual rather than a function of her plot to flee "pushes us to examine queer [gender performance] not solely as an imposition that enslaved people may have strategically redirected toward liberation, but also as a potentially self-determined orientation leading to pleasure...in addition to liberation."²²⁸ In tacit response to her enslaver's prediction that "she will doubtless deny to whom she belongs,"²²⁹ Mariah's self-liberatory pursuits as well as her non-normative self-styling might be read as the formerly enslaved woman's* unspoken assertion that to whom she *actually* belonged, defiantly and entirely, was herself.

²²⁵ "Griffe" was a racial classification term used to describe individuals of Black and biracial Black parentage as well as those of Black and indigenous ancestry.

²²⁶ H.F. Wade, "\$500 Reward," *Freedom on the Move*, Originally Published 1837, <https://app.freedomonthemove.org/advertisements/0bef3e47-7530-4137-98f3-888d8dd1ddfc?limit=24&page=11>.

²²⁷ Wade, "\$500 Reward."

²²⁸ Lewis, "Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed," 343.

²²⁹ Wade, "\$500 Reward."

The seizing of space necessary to engage in George and Mariah’s particular brand of gender creativity also proves pivotal in the escape tale of formerly enslaved author and abolitionist Harriet Jacobs. In her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs “contravene[d] the plot of the standard fugitive narrative, which, according to convention...traced ‘not only the journey from slavery to freedom but also the journey from slavehood to manhood.’”²³⁰ Writing against the multitude of texts that at that time framed slavery in masculinist terms—specifically, as a queering form of emasculation imposed on Black men from which only revolt or manumission would redeem them—Jacobs’s work compelled readers to grapple with a story of freedom that was enabled, rather than impeded by, the embrace of queer embodiment. This was especially true in passages where Jacobs described her efforts to flee her violent, sexually predatory enslaver—a process that, at one point, necessitated Harriet’s disguising herself in coded-as-masculine attire given to her by a friend and accomplice named Betty. Jacobs recalls that:

Betty brought me a suit of sailor’s clothes—jacket, trowsers[sic], and tarpaulin hat. She gave me a small bundle, saying I might need it where I was going...I tried to tell her how grateful I felt for all her kindness, but she interrupted me...“Put your hands in your pockets, and walk ricketty[sic], like de sailors.” I performed to her satisfaction...It was a long time since I had taken a walk out of doors, and the fresh air revived me. It was also pleasant to hear a human voice speaking to me above a whisper. I passed several people whom I knew, but they did not recognize me in my disguise.²³¹

This excerpt is striking in its open acknowledgement of the enjoyment Jacobs derives from participation in a moment of covert gender subversion. Whereas elsewhere in the

²³⁰ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 67.

²³¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover Publications, 2001): 94.

text, Harriet expresses shame about the decisions she makes in order to survive (including initiating a sexual relationship with a local white man and mothering two of his children), in this sequence she evinces no such ambivalence. Rather than attempting to distance herself from this act of gender transgression (or frame it as solely a matter of necessity), Jacobs discusses the pleasure she takes in moving between safe houses as occurring *due* to her brief performance of masculinity rather than *in spite* of it. Thus, although “reading black women’s masculine expressions as powerful can...seem [counterintuitive], given that such expressions may appear to affirm racist discourse of black gender failure...these expressions and their reproduction through writing challenge cultural beliefs in race, sex, and gender as scrutable traits with fixed meanings.”²³² By subverting gender norms in order to move through the world unnoticed and with greater ease, “Jacobs seize[d] on black women’s masculine expression as one critical vehicle for...resistance”²³³ and pleasure.

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton refers to Jacob’s flight as “fugitive theater,” positing that her gender performances expose the ways “Blackness functioned [during and after slavery] as a site for an elaboration of gender in which...gender within Blackness [was revealed] to be a polymorphous proposition.”²³⁴ Harriet’s passing masculine embodiments point to “an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured ‘outside’ of gender’s established

²³² Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 346.

²³³ Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 346.

²³⁴ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 74.

and establishing symbolic order.”²³⁵ Jacobs’ specific ‘revisable reiteration’ of gender allowed her to once again behold human voices, evade her enslaver’s surveillance, and—ultimately—secure her freedom.

Post-Emancipation, Black women continued to engage in these same forms of gender digression, as the WPA narrative of Texan Julia Blanks demonstrates. Born in San Antonio during the second year of the War, Blanks’ experiences were marked by periods of flux and near-constant movement until the time of her second marriage, at which point she moved to “the Adams ranch on the Frio River [and] raised her family.”²³⁶ This family consisted of several children, including an elder daughter whom Blanks recalls “used to take the place of a cowboy, and put her hair up in her hat. And ride! My goodness, she loved to ride!”²³⁷ As with her predecessors Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs, Julia’s daughter’s divergence from normative (white) femininity—emblemized both by her personal styling choices and her horsemanship, which is framed as unusually exceptional—seem to represent a point of pride rather than a symbol of racialized gender failure.

Later in her transcript, Blanks recalls that “They thought [my daughter] was a boy. She wore pants and leggin’s. And maybe you think she couldn’t ride!”²³⁸ Like Mariah from the 1837 New Orleans runaway slave ad, Julia Blanks’ daughter seems to have consistently flouted traditional nineteenth century gender conventions, including

²³⁵ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 74.

²³⁶ Julia Blanks, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

²³⁷ Julia Blanks, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

²³⁸ Julia Blanks, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

those concerning clothing. Such fluidity underscores the fact that “although the perception that ‘race’ and ‘gender’ are fixed and knowable terms is the dominant logic of identity,”²³⁹ the performances of women* like Craft, Truth, Jacobs, Mariah, and Blanks’ daughter are perhaps best read as forms of “movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival”²⁴⁰—that is, as utile ambiguities that expose Blackness, both during and after the era of chattel slavery, as a conduit to gender making, gender mutability, and gender multiplicity.

POLICING

Such a lens might help to reframe accounts of former buffalo soldier Cathay Williams, many of which position her decision to traverse gender boundaries and enlist in the Army as a sort of coerced capitulation to circumstance rather than a kind of potentially queer self-making. In her brief profile of the figure, biographer DeAnne Blanton speculates on the motivations underlying Cathay’s 1866 enlistment, writing:

[Williams’] reasons for becoming a soldier are a matter of conjecture, as she never stated them. Was she fleeing an unhappy life with family or other relations? Was she an orphan? She might have had compelling reasons to change her identity, such as running from something or someone. Perhaps she viewed the army as a way to get out of Missouri, or get away from home.²⁴¹

It is telling that of all the possible reasons listed, the notion that Cathay Williams may have derived pleasure from her insurgent gender performances is not among them.

To be sure, Williams’ pre-War experiences very well may have been shaped by a lack of

²³⁹ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 2.

²⁴⁰ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 2.

²⁴¹ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

familial support or a difficult upbringing—especially given that she was raised in captivity and little is known about her life before *or* after Emancipation. However, the presence of these factors would not have precluded the possibility that Cathay’s stint in the U.S. 38th Infantry represented an agential instance of gender expansiveness—one which “demonstrate[d] that some [formerly] enslaved people disrupted, appropriated, and/or negotiated with Western conceptions of masculinity, considered the preeminent vehicle of power in U. S. antebellum culture, toward future-oriented, [queer] possibilities.”²⁴²

Further, contrary to earlier accounts that posited Williams “never stated” her reasons for pursuing military service, subsequent narratives center the figure’s own words on the subject, thus offering some insight into her motives. “Cathay was tall at 5’9” (175 cm) and had no problem enlisting since a medical exam wasn’t required,” Lyndon Bilal writes, adding “Cathay had a cousin and a friend who enlisted, and she decided that in order to earn a living, she would enlist too.”²⁴³ In an earlier interview, Williams reportedly confirmed this sequence of events, telling her interviewer “The regiment I joined wore the Zouave uniform and only two persons, a cousin and a particular friend, members of the regiment, knew that I was a woman. They never ‘blowed’ on me. They were partly the cause of my joining the army.”²⁴⁴ Kinship was not the only cause,

²⁴² Lewis, “Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed,” 342.

²⁴³ Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

²⁴⁴ Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

however, as Cathay explains, “Another reason [I enlisted] was I wanted to make my own living and not be dependent on relations or friends.”²⁴⁵

This latter claim marks the ways Williams diverged from the cult of true womanhood’s antebellum model of dependency and domesticity; rather than conforming to heteronormative trajectories that positioned marriage as the only means for nineteenth century women to ensure their own social and financial security, Cathay Williams engaged a subversive alternative that ultimately constituted a kind of queer potentiality. This engagement extended into Williams’ post-discharge years, as she continued to organize her life in ways that broke with heterosexist convention. Shortly after beginning work as a cook in Fort Union, New Mexico, Cathay “briefly married,” but dissolved the union “after [her spouse] stole her money and horses.”²⁴⁶ In stark defiance of the era’s gender expectations (namely that women* be matrimony-minded and endlessly forbearing), Williams had her husband arrested for theft and never remarried.

The years between Cathay’s initial discharge in 1868 and decision to file for an Army pension in 1891 proved much less eventful, as she moved throughout the American Southwest, often in search of work. After serving as cook for a Fort Union colonel through 1870, Williams relocated to first Pueblo and then Las Animas County, Colorado, where she worked as a laundress.²⁴⁷ Eventually she settled down in Trinidad, where there is some indication she may have done nursing work.²⁴⁸ Each of these positions seemingly

²⁴⁵ Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

²⁴⁶ Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

²⁴⁷ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

²⁴⁸ Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

signaled a move away from the former soldier's earlier subversions and a resumption of normatively gendered labor, though the reasons for this shift are not entirely clear.

Blanton, in fact, questions:

Why did Cathay Williams return to the identity of a woman working in low-paying servitude? We can only guess at her reasons. She may have been tired of living as a man. Maybe concealing the fact she was a woman became too much of a burden. Perhaps she had no choice. Her bad health likely made her incapable of the generally physically demanding manual labor available to uneducated black men working for wages. She may have viewed the somewhat less physically demanding "woman's works" her only alternative in making a living.²⁴⁹

These theories, however, do not reconcile themselves with Williams' prior experiences, which do not seem to have been characterized by any particular difficulty with 'concealment.' In fact, despite numerous hospitalizations throughout her stint in the Army, Williams' gender transversals were not discovered until nearly two years after her enlistment. Further, there is no real indication that Cathay "tired of living as a man;" rather, her outing and subsequent dismissal from the military effectively foreclosed the possibility of her doing so (at least in the ways she had previously been able to access). Thus, it seems most likely that this punitive act of gender policing informed Williams' post-discharge labor choices by stripping the soldier of her chosen means of income and mobility.

The Army's later rejection of Williams' pension request can be understood as a manifestation of this same brand of policing. Though much has been made of the Pension Bureau's decision to deny Cathay's claim based on the assertion that she was not actually

²⁴⁹ Blanton, "Cathay Williams."

disabled (and therefore not eligible for an “invalid pension”)²⁵⁰ rather than an assertion that she had committed fraud by enlisting in the first place, this should not be read as the state’s condoning of Williams’ insurgent gender performances. Other women of the era who admitted to having served as men “usually met with resistance, not just from the pension clerks, but from the army itself;”²⁵¹ it is probable that Williams would have faced similar resistance had her claim not been denied out of hand. In fact, Cathay’s final pension file contains a brief note in which “a clerk wrote...that the question of identity was never raised, as the claim was rejected for medical reasons. This one sentence leaves open the probability that her service may have been questioned had there been no recourse to deny her claim on strictly medical grounds.”²⁵² An instance of gender transgression initially undertaken to allow Williams to “make [her] own living and not be dependent on relations or friends”²⁵³ ultimately rendered her vulnerable to retributive, hegemonic sanction, both at the moment of her hasty military discharge and years later with the rejection of her pension claim. In this way, Williams’ story serves to underscore the reality that enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women’s* flouting of normative femininity did not always offer avenues to liberation (as in the case of Ellen Craft and Harriet Jacobs), but in fact often exposed these individuals to various kinds of social, economic, and physical violence.

250 Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

251 Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

252 Blanton, “Cathay Williams.”

253 Bilal, “Cathay Williams,” 8.

For some nineteenth century Black women* and girls, these violences began early, as any deviation from traditional gender conventions was routinely penalized, despite the fact that Black women* were already excluded from the era's rigid models of 'true' womanhood. In fact, the performance or embodiment of masculinity by those not identified as men was so stigmatized that its imposition was often used as a punishment meant to humiliate enslaved women*. North Carolinian Lizzie Baker makes note of this practice in her WPA interview with federal employee T. Pat Matthews, recalling an incident recounted to her years before by her mother. "Mammy said sometimes [those enslaved by Bryant Newkirk] were well fed and others dey almost starved...[Due to this,] some o' de help, a colored woman, stole something [once] when she was hungry [and] put it off on my mother."²⁵⁴ As a result, "Missus made mother wear trousers for a year to punish her."²⁵⁵

Texan Laura Redmoun shares a similar tale, telling her interviewer that after Emancipation she "advertise[d] round in the papers" until she was able to locate her mother, from whom she'd been separated since childhood. Redmoun explains that "mammy...come and lived with me [but] she [was] in pitiful shape"²⁵⁶ after suffering years of her former enslaver's abuses. Listed among these offenses is the fact that "her master sold her [to a] man [who]...made her wear breeches and tote big, heavy logs."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Lizzie Baker, interview with T. Pat Matthews, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1*.

²⁵⁵ Lizzie Baker, interview with T. Pat Matthews, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1*.

²⁵⁶ Laura Redmoun, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3*.

²⁵⁷ Laura Redmoun, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 3*.

In the instances outlined by both Baker and Redmoun, their mothers' donning of masculine-coded attire served not as a liberatory act of self-making, but rather as a vivid illustration of the ways "white slaveholding society used its beliefs in black women's masculinity"—or at least the power to impose the *markers* of that masculinity—"to support its exploitation and violation of Black people through slavery."²⁵⁸

Perhaps paradoxically, slaveholding members of the planter class often severely disciplined enslaved Black women* and girls who seized these markers of their own fruition, as the WPA interview of South Carolinian Victoria Adams demonstrates. Born on "Cedar Creek, in Fairfield County,"²⁵⁹ Adams was enslaved by a man named Samuel Black and his wife, Martha. Though Victoria insists that her "massa and missus was good to [her]," she adds, "sometime I was so bad they had to whip me."²⁶⁰ One such occasion, Adams explains, took place on a day when her mistress had "[gone] off on a visit and left [Victoria] at home." Momentarily freed from her enslaver's scrutiny, Adams surreptitiously "put on a pair of Bubba's pants and scrub de floor wid them on."²⁶¹

This harmless moment of youthful exploration was soon discovered by Martha Black who "told [Victoria] it was a sin for [her] to put on a man's pants and whip [her] pretty bad."²⁶² Interestingly, Adams' mistress positioned Victoria's perceived

²⁵⁸ Lewis, "Neuter-Bound/Neuter-Freed," 342.

²⁵⁹ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶⁰ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶¹ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶² Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

transgression not only as a violation of Victorian gender norms, but one against morality as well. “Missus...say it’s in de Bible dat: ‘A man shall not put on a woman’s clothes, nor a woman put on a man’s clothes,’” Adams tells WPA worker Everett Pierce. But though Victoria expresses some doubt about the veracity of Martha’s supercilious quoting of scripture (noting that she “ain’t never see that [passage] in de Bible”),²⁶³ Black’s attempts to police Adams’ brief embrace of gender subversion ultimately proved successful, as Adams concludes her recollection with the acknowledgement that “from then ‘til now, I ain’t put on no more pants.”²⁶⁴

Often, this faux-corrective process manifested in subtler, less overtly violent ways, but still stemmed from a notion of gender variance, temporary or otherwise, as a form of moral deficiency. Formerly enslaved Missourian Emma Knight, for instance, recalls how after Emancipation, her employer’s daughter “learned [her] not to be such a tomboy and not to be so rough.”²⁶⁵ She adds, “I tell you I was a bad girl when I was young. I could climb every tree on de master’s farm and my clothes was always in rags from being so rough.”²⁶⁶ Though Knight’s descriptions of her childhood physical capacities—which would almost certainly have been read as masculine—seem to connote a kind of nostalgic pride, it is evident that by the time of her WPA interview, Knight had

²⁶³ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶⁴ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶⁵ Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

²⁶⁶ Emma Knight, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

internalized the idea that her previously “rough” ways represented a personal flaw that needed to be remedied.

This belief had also apparently been internalized by Knight’s (formerly enslaved) mother, who, whenever Emma returned home with her clothes torn from climbing trees and “be[ing] such a tomboy,” would “whip [Knight] with a broomstick”—an experience Emma rationalizes by reiterating, “I guess I was bad.”²⁶⁷ Like her contemporary Victoria Adams, Emma Knight’s experiences of ascribed failure and normalizing socialization are indicative of the ways that both during and after the era of chattel slavery, Black genders were dismissed as inherently aberrant while simultaneously being subjected to near-constant policing.

On occasion, however, Black women* and girls who approached gender in non-normative ways found acceptance within their families and communities, which worked to mitigate the impositions of dominant cultural expectations. To that end, Arkansan Martha Johnson’s narrative is particularly illustrative. Recounting to interviewer Irene Robertson that she was “born at Lake Providence, Louisiana”²⁶⁸ to formerly enslaved parents shortly after the War, Martha reflects on the death of her mother and how she was afterwards raised by her father, a carpenter who sometimes also worked as a blacksmith. Johnson notes that her “Papa had no boys, only three girls” and adds, “I was his ‘Tom Boy.’” This designation, apparently, consisted of “[doing] the milking and out-of-door

²⁶⁷ Emma Knight, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri*.

²⁶⁸ Martha Johnson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*.

turns”²⁶⁹—activities her father seemed to encourage and that Martha herself seemed to enjoy.

Georgian Nellie Smith offers a similar account of her youth. Born enslaved alongside her mother Harriet on “the old Weir place,”²⁷⁰ Smith was primarily raised by her grandmother after being orphaned at an early age. The two were freed at the conclusion of the War, which took place right when Nellie was “jus’ gittin’ big enough to handle that old peafowl-tail fly brush” her enslavers had instructed her to use in order to “keep the flies off the table.”²⁷¹ After Emancipation, Smith spent some time living with her aunt who worked for a “northern lady that they called Mrs. Meeker”²⁷² until her grandfather eventually “bought one of the old slave cabins from Master Jack” where her family “lived...for a long time.”²⁷³ Later, when she was “about eight or nine years old,” Nellie and her grandparents relocated to Rock Spring, and she explains that not long after this final move, her relatives discovered that Smith “was a regular tomboy.”²⁷⁴ She recalls that “the woods was all ‘round Rock Spring then, and I did have a big time climbin’ them trees. I jus’ fairly lived in ‘em during the daytime.”²⁷⁵

Unlike Emma Knight, Nellie—at least initially—was not chastised for this behavior; in fact, her grandfather seemed to support Smith’s self-designation as a

²⁶⁹ Martha Johnson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*.

²⁷⁰ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷¹ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷² Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷³ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷⁴ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷⁵ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

“regular tomboy,” affirming her interest in, among other things, horseback riding.

Remembering a time when her grandfather promised Nellie an opportunity to ride in exchange for agreeing to forgo a local Fourth of July celebration, Smith recounts:

[His promise] jus’ tickled me to death, for I did lak to ride. Grandpa had two young mules what was still wild, and when he said I could ride one of ‘em...I was so crazy to go that nobody couldn’t tell me nothin’. Auntie lent me her domino coat to wear as a ridin’ habit and I sneaked and slipped [on] a pair of spurs, then Grandpa put a saddle on the critter and helped me to git up on him.²⁷⁶

Though the experience quickly turned into a jarring one after Nellie misused her purloined spurs to unintentionally send her mule into a full-speed gallop, that both her grandfather and her aunt facilitated the ride highlights the means by which Smith’s family sought to create space for Nellie to explore her interests and understanding of self without mandating strict adherence to limited and limiting gendered parameters.

Later in her narrative, Smith recalls that “Grandpa used to send me to Phinzy’s Mill...It would take all day long...and I always had the best sort of time when I went.”²⁷⁷ Nellie’s “Uncle Isham run the mill...and he would let [her] think [she] was helping him.”²⁷⁸ The two would spend hours grinding wheat and corn, and then, Smith adds, “while he helped me eat my lunch, he would call me his little ‘tomboy gal’ and would tell me about the things he used to do when he was ‘bout my age.”²⁷⁹ Once again, Nellie’s non-performances of femininity were met with affirmation rather than censure, with her

²⁷⁶ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷⁷ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷⁸ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

²⁷⁹ Nellie Smith, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3*.

uncle allowing her to share in both his work at the mill as well as the memories of his boyhood adventures. Unfortunately, other Black women* and girls of Smith's time—including Cathay Williams, Victoria Adams, and Emma Knight—could not always count on this kind of support for their various gender diversions, as white cisheteropatriarchal mores consistently came to shape these individuals' relationships not only to those around them, but to the larger society as well.

CONCLUSION

After briefly assuming her disguise as a sailor in order to evade her enslaver Dr. Flint, Harriet Jacobs relocated to her (previously manumitted) grandmother's property, where a small shed had been added. Above this structure, there “was a very small garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice” that became Jacobs' hiding place for the next several years. From this vantage point, Harriet was able to observe the comings and goings of Dr. Flint as well as the activities of her small children without detection. Accessing this position as fugitive voyeur, however, necessitated that Jacobs endure severe discomfort and, ultimately, muscle atrophy from prolonged confinement to a room so small she was compelled to remain in a reclining position at all times, as there was not room to stand. In this way, the garret served as a liminal space—both the site where Harriet's emancipation began as well as “a dismal cell...and dark hole.”²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 41.

In the lives and liberatory pursuits of enslaved and formerly enslaved nineteenth century Black women*, the space of gender was similarly bifurcated. While on the one hand, engaging in non-normative gender performances enabled individuals like Jacobs and Ellen Craft avenues to escape, responses to these performances were often rife with their own complications. In the case of Craft, the specter of her masculine alter ego Mr. Johnson engendered a phobic response from observers as well as her own husband, even as Johnson's existence enabled Craft to free both herself and William.

The ramifications of antebellum and postbellum Black women* embracing subversive forms of gender creativity are even more starkly evident in the details surrounding the final days of former buffalo soldier Cathay Williams' life. After the rejection of her pension request, Williams all but disappeared from the archive; however, given that "The 1900 federal census schedule for Trinidad, Colorado does not list Cathay Williams, nor cite any black woman with a similar name," it can be assumed that Williams passed "sometime between late 1892 and 1900."²⁸¹ As a final recrimination for her incendiary act of traversing gender boundaries and infiltrating the masculine space of the United States military, Williams was left by the state to die alone, penniless and in the final stages of a debilitating disease.²⁸² Though Craft and Jacobs fared somewhat better, it is clear that—at best—instances of gender insurgency often represented only "something

281 Blanton, "Cathay Williams."

282 Blanton, "Cathay Williams."

akin to freedom”²⁸³ for enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women*, as these instances were almost always met with resistance or even outright retaliation.

These retaliations disproportionately impacted enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* whose lives were marked by ambiguity, as the larger society they inhabited consistently failed to make space for those ambiguities. Lacking the language (and often, the desire) to account for the fluid, expansive, variegated ways such individuals moved through the world, outside observers routinely reduced these non-normative gender performances to matters of paucity, anomaly, or failure. At worst, Black women* who flouted pre- and post-Emancipation gender conventions were positioned as threats and imposters; at best, they were subject to have their insurgent re-scriptings co-opted and ultimately erased.

An anecdote from Gary Cooper’s profile of Mary Fields is indicative of this latter reality, as Cooper shares the story of “a priest [who] had been told he would be met in Cascade. Upon arriving at the mission earlier than expected, the nuns asked how he came. He replied: ‘Oh, that big colored man met me at Cascade and drove me out.’ He was quite shocked when he learned that the man was a woman, Mary Fields.”²⁸⁴ This story bears a striking resemblance to one often told about Harriet Tubman’s contemporary and friend John Brown, who reportedly once wrote, “[Tubman] is the most of a man naturally that I ever met with. There is abundant material here and of the right

²⁸³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 48.

²⁸⁴ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 98.

quality.”²⁸⁵ Though neither of these descriptions are intended to be disparaging—and in fact, Tubman is said to have taken Brown’s assessment as a compliment—they both manage to miss the point.

The same is true in sketches of Mary Fields in which she is likened to men of her era, at times in revealing ways. In William Katz’s *The Black West*, it is noted that “Mary...was born in Tennessee during the Administration of another Tennessean, Andrew Jackson. Although the two never met...they had much in common—ambition, pluck, and a penchant for combat.”²⁸⁶ In each of these instances, Tubman and Fields are once again rendered ‘honorary’ men, imagined to more closely resemble genocidal former presidents than anything that could legibly be read as womanhood*. Yet this framing ignores the project in which women* like Harriet Tubman, Mary Fields, and their contemporaries (many of whom also had ‘ambition, pluck, and a penchant for [liberty] combat’) were seemingly engaged—one of creating space within a category never meant to include them, of broadening the parameters of the pre-conceived, and of striving (though, perhaps inevitably, never fully managing) to circumvent the normative and truly exist as “the freest souls ever to draw a breath or a .38.”²⁸⁷ In this, these individuals were neither “unfinished” women nor peripheral men, but rather “exemplary

²⁸⁵ Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar*, 183.

²⁸⁶ Katz, *The Black West*, 155.

²⁸⁷ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 96.

architecture[s] of Black possibility,”²⁸⁸ creating for themselves potentially pleasurable spaces to “resist and pose”—and often “in the master’s clothes, no less.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019): 199.

²⁸⁹ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 93.

Chapter Three: “She Wasn’t No Multiplying Woman:” Bucking Heteronormative Trajectories, Negotiating Kinship

In 1981, a lengthy collection of free-born Shaker eldress Rebecca Jackson’s autobiographical writings, entitled *Gifts of Power*, was released. Extensively edited by scholar Jean Humez, the anthology locates Jackson within vast histories of Black women’s* public and religious work. To that end, the text opens with an account of the night Jackson first embarked on the spiritual journey that would eventually come to shape her life in ways that broke with cisheteronormative convention, underscoring the means by which nineteenth century Black women* organized their domestic spheres in subversive (and often queer) ways.

On an evening shortly after her thirty-fifth birthday, Jackson was awakened by the sounds of a severe thunderstorm outside of the house she shared with her older brother, nieces, nephews, and husband, Samuel. Though she had been accustomed in the preceding five years (during which her fear of storms developed) to take shelter in her bed in times of inclement weather, Jackson found that on this occasion her “only place of rest [was taken] away and [she] rose up and walked the floor back and forth wringing [her] hands and crying under great fear.”²⁹⁰ An unidentified voice sounded in her head, warning Jackson of her impending death, and she was overcome with shame as she imagined confronting her own mortality before having atoned for prior sins. She kneeled and began to pray, “and in this moment of despair the cloud bursted, the heavens [were]

²⁹⁰ Jean M. Humez, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1987): 71.

clear, and the mountain was gone. [Jackson] was filled with love...[and] rose from [her] knees, ran downstairs, [and] opened the door to let the lightning in the house, for it was like sheets of glory to [her] soul.”²⁹¹

This event marked an abrupt pivot from Jackson’s formerly somewhat passive approach to religion (underscored by the fact that in spite of her brother, Joseph Cox, being an A.M.E. preacher, Jackson herself had never formally joined the church) to an ardent religious and spiritual fervor that would eventually lead to Jackson’s alienation from family, friends, and—perhaps most notably—the Methodist establishment. Using what she considered to be her newly acquired divine ‘gifts’ (which included those of discernment/foresight and healing), Jackson began forming her own faith-based community, comprised largely of “predominantly or entirely female ‘praying bands’”²⁹² that she often led and with whom she began to meet on a consistent basis. This alone was enough to garner accusations of Jackson improperly “aleading the men”²⁹³ and “chopping up churches”²⁹⁴ (that is, acting as a subversive force within her given religious context), but it was to be her next epiphany that would ultimately set her on the path away from Philadelphia (at least for a time) and toward a queerer—though not necessarily less contentious—future with the Shakers.

During the course of a neighborhood revival in 1831, Jackson writes that she “saw for the first time what the sin of the fall of man was.” (Jean Humez clarifies that this

²⁹¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 72.

²⁹² Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 6.

²⁹³ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 20.

²⁹⁴ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 21.

refers to “lust, or sexual gratification for its own sake rather than for reproduction in obedience to divine command.”)²⁹⁵ From this time on, Rebecca sought a celibate life, though it is unclear just what this celibacy meant in the context of Jackson’s later relationships (as will be discussed in the following chapter). She found herself thinking that “if [she] had all the earth, [she] would give it, to be a single woman. How to return home to [her] husband [she] knew not.”²⁹⁶ Tellingly, Jackson admits that she “had never been happier in all [her] life”²⁹⁷ than in the moments after having this revelation.

Rebecca’s fears concerning her husband’s reaction to this spiritual discovery and move to a celibate lifestyle, however, would prove to be well-founded, as Samuel Jackson balked at his wife’s sudden rejection of the sexual (or, at least, the heterosexual) in ways that mirrored those of the larger Black Methodist network with which Rebecca had, up until that point, been affiliated. Jackson found that she would have to fight—like countless other Black women* of her time, who left marriages, rebelled against the institution entirely, and negotiated motherhood in insurgent ways—to “gain complete control over the use of her body...in a period when women were expected to deny female sexuality and submissively endure the mysterious male sexual urge.”²⁹⁸ Thus, though never enslaved, Jackson and her narrative represent a trenchant point of departure when moving to consider the means by which nineteenth century Black women* defied expectation and subverted the normative.

²⁹⁵ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 76.

²⁹⁶ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 76-77.

²⁹⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 76.

²⁹⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 17.

“NOT MUCH CARE FOR COURTING:” ON DESIRE AND LANGUAGE

The framing of this fight for corporeal reclamation must center the language Black people themselves were using to gesture toward what might presently be understood as queerness, in addition to that language which was externally imposed. As Alice Walker points out in her review of *Gifts of Power*, appearing first in *The Black Scholar* before being reprinted in her foundational 1983 work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, the terms modern historians might employ in their scholarship concerning figures like Jackson, (including, for Humez, “lesbian”²⁹⁹—a term tied etymologically to famed Greek poet, Sappho) “may not...be suitable (or comfortable) for Black women who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, [Walker] can imagine Black women who love[d] women...hardly thinking of what the Greeks were doing.”³⁰⁰ Given this, it is necessary and perhaps most generative to attend to the ways potential queerness was couched within the specific context of the antebellum and postbellum United States *by* those existing within this context; these are evident throughout the WPA slave narrative collection, and range from the exceedingly subtle to the candidly frank.

Often, resistance to cisheteropatriarchal norms was discussed as a matter of disinterest in (or distaste for) those of other genders, as in the case of Arkansan Kato Benton, who begins his interview by clarifying—in a vocational description that in itself breaks with those of many of his contemporaries—“I didn’t work in no field much. I

²⁹⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 9.

³⁰⁰ Alice Walker, “Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson (1795- 1871), Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress by Jean McMahon Humez,” *The Black Scholar* 12 (1981): 67.

washed and ironed and cleaned up the house for the white folks. Yes ma'am!"³⁰¹ When asked later in the interview about his marital status, Benton adds, "No ma'am, I ain't never been married in my life. I been ba'chin' [bacheloring]. I get along so fine and nice without marryin'. I never did care anything about that. I treat the women nice—speak to 'em, but just let 'em pass on by."³⁰²

Benton's hands-off approach (or rather lack of approach) to heterosexual love and marriage echoes that of Alabaman Abe Whittess, known affectionately as the "Mayor of Douglassville" (a suburb of Bay Minette "where a number of Negroes had developed a residential section").³⁰³ After detailing his experiences while enslaved by a Colonel Rupert at his 'Scooba' plantation, Whittess stops "to take a chew of his favorite tobacco and [admit] that he lived alone in his one-room cabin by preference. He doesn't want women 'botherin' 'round his place and ain't had no truckin' with 'em for years."³⁰⁴ Though in both cases these disclosures are presented in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner, the underlying implications of the two men's refusals are far-reaching, leaving space for one to question what other kinds of intimacies such individuals might have sought, even as they shunned "trucking" within the bounds of societal expectation.

Others in the collection left less room for such ambiguity, including Georgia Baker of Athens who says of her two "masters," cousins Lordnorth Stephens and

³⁰¹ Kato Benton, interview with Bernice Bowden, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd*.

³⁰² Kato Benton, interview with Bernice Bowden, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1, Abbott-Byrd*.

³⁰³ Abe Whittess, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

³⁰⁴ Abe Whittess, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

“Marse” Alec, “Neither one of ‘em ever married. Marse Lordnorth was a good man, but he didn’t have no use for ‘omans—he was a sissy.”³⁰⁵ South Carolinian Paul Jenkins appears to be making a similar insinuation in his narrative, as he details at great length the romantic proclivities of his father, a celebrated (Black) politician who married once during enslavement (it is unclear under what conditions) and—after finding himself widowed—declined to do so again for the rest of his life. Jenkins recalls:

One day some white men come to see daddy long after mammy was gone, and they say to daddy: ‘Paul, when you gwine to jump the broomstick again?’ My daddy was the only one who not laugh when they say that. He reply: ‘I has no women in view and no weddin’ dream in the back of my head. I has decided a wicked woman am a big bother and a good woman am a bore. To my way of [thinking], that is the only difference between them.’ The white folks not smile, but say: ‘You’ll see! Just wait ‘til the right girl come along!’³⁰⁶

Apparently, however, this ‘right girl’ failed to materialize, as Jenkins’ father remained unwed. Indeed, the elder Jenkins takes Abe Whittess’ lack of interest in having a woman “botherin’ ‘round” his space a step further, declaring *all* women—whether wicked or good—a nuisance. Paul Jenkins supplements this story with that of his brother Edgar, who loses a fiancée at sea and subsequently, like his father, refuses to marry. But while this decision might otherwise be understood as a manifestation of ongoing grief, Jenkins seems to imply a very different impetus. “[Edgar] never has married,” he explains, adding, “[he’s] *peculiar* lak our daddy, don’t you think?”³⁰⁷ [emphasis mine.] Though

³⁰⁵ Georgia Baker, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*.

³⁰⁶ Paul Jenkins, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

³⁰⁷ Paul Jenkins, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

Jenkins does not elaborate on just what sort of peculiarity he is ascribing here to his father—and, by extension, his sibling—his descriptions are undoubtedly rife with queer potential.

It is possible also to read such potential onto the narrative of Floridian Edward Lycurgas, who—after offering a thorough account of his mother and father’s pre-Emancipation realities—is described by his interviewer Pearl Randolph as “a lover of home” who is “very shy and [does] not care much for courting.”³⁰⁸ Randolph adds that “[Edward] remained with his parents until their deaths and did not leave the vicinity for years. He is still unmarried.”³⁰⁹ Once again, the choice not to marry is framed as a matter of indifference toward “courting” (and, in this case, a love of home) rather than, perhaps, a kind of queer refusal. Yet narratives like Lycurgas’ point to another linguistic and categorical trend within this particular archive, whereby the positions of the ‘bachelor’ and the ‘old maid’ are imbued with meaning.

Countless formerly enslaved individuals utilized the former classification in their descriptions of past enslavers, including Georgian Emeline Stepney,³¹⁰ Texan Clara Brim,³¹¹ and Alabaman Mary Ella Grandberry, who recalls a “Massa Jim [who] was a bach’lor.”³¹² Using language reminiscent of Abe Whittess’, she adds, “He ain’t never had

³⁰⁸ Edward Lycurgas, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 3, Florida, Anderson-Wilson with combined interviews of others*.

³⁰⁹ Edward Lycurgas, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 3, Florida, Anderson-Wilson with combined interviews of others*.

³¹⁰ Emeline Stepney, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles*.

³¹¹ Clara Brim, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*.

³¹² Mary Ella Grandberry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

much truck with women folks. Iffen he had any chilluns, I never knowed nothin' 'bout 'em."³¹³ Others, like Willie Cozart of Zebulon, North Carolina, used the term to describe themselves. "Yes'm I'se a batchelor," Cozart explains before describing later in the transcript how he "plowed his lan', tended it year atter year, [and] lived by [him]self,"³¹⁴ by choice.

Similarly, the figure of the 'old maid' appears in the archive regularly and often in revealing ways. Betty Curlett³¹⁵ and Elvie Lomack³¹⁶ (of Hazen and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, respectively) mention white women—often former enslavers—who remained unmarried up until the time of their deaths. Fellow Arkansan Betty Hodge does the same, while simultaneously setting out a contextual frame for parsing how such a choice would have been understood during her youth. "Miss Olivia was [Mr. John's] wife, but Miss Presh was a old maid," Hodge discloses, adding, "Folks used to think it was sort of bad if a woman didn't marry. Thought she have no chances. It sort of be something like a disgrace if a woman was a old maid."³¹⁷

The seeming prevalence of this attitude toward unmarried women renders the narrative of Georgian Susan Matthews all the more telling. When prompted by WPA

³¹³ Mary Ella Grandberry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

³¹⁴ Willie Cozart, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter*.

³¹⁵ Betty Curlett, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2, Cannon-Evans*.

³¹⁶ Elvie Lomack, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

³¹⁷ Betty Hodge, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson-Isom*.

worker Ruth Sanford to discuss her romantic history, Matthews responds, “I never did get married. I’s e a old maid nigger, an’ they tells me you don’t see old maid niggers. How come I ain’t married I don’t know. Seems like when I wuz young I seed somep’n wrong with all the mens that would come around. Then atter while I wuz kinder old and they didn’t come around no mo.”³¹⁸ Despite Betty Hodge’s description of ‘old maids’ as social pariahs, however, Matthews appears to take pride in her unmarried status, even laughingly joking about the men still coming around her house attempting to ‘court’ her. Thus, her narrative is emblematic of the means by which nineteenth century Black people who subverted hegemonic expectations in regard to romance and desire were equally subversive in their moves to claim and reclaim language that might otherwise be used to police or shame them.

“I NEVER WANTS NO TRUCK WITH ANY MAN:” ON REJECTING MARRIAGE

Like Matthews, the experiences of antebellum and postbellum Black women* were often marked by an avowed distaste for the notion of heterosexual marriage. This holds true in spite of the fact that both prior to and proceeding Emancipation, Black women* who forwent marriage risked running up against a number of practical issues. While some formerly enslaved people avowedly married for love, for instance, (as in the case of North Carolinian Lucy Dunn, whose interview is actually titled “Aunt Lucy’s Love Story”),³¹⁹ the choice to wed often represented—first and foremost—a sound

³¹⁸ Susan Matthews, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3, Kendricks-Styles*.

³¹⁹ Lucy Ann Dunn, interview with Mary A. Hicks, *WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1*.

financial decision. Mattie Fannen, in fact, speaks frankly of marrying shortly after the War in order to “better [her] living.”³²⁰ Despite these rather pressing considerations, however, many Black women* persisted in abjuring the normative.

This persistence is evident in the interviews of Lindy Patton—who boasts that she has “never married and never will”³²¹—and Catherine Williams, who laughs outright when confronted with the topic, proclaiming, “I have never married. I will have to find that man yet, and at this age I don’t expect to find him. Ha! Ha! Never found that man yet.”³²² Once again, the notion of having not “yet” met any man worth marrying is invoked for what explanative power it wields in the insistence of individuals like Williams and Matthews to remain single, though it is of course possible that there were other factors at play.

Texan Rose Williams takes this one step further, revealing in her narrative that during the course of her enslavement, she was “forced to live with [an enslaved man named] Rufus ‘gainst [her] wants”—something for which she never forgives her enslaver, “Massa Hawkins.”³²³ Irrespective of her disdain (and initial confusion over her ‘master’s’ intentions), Williams was forced to co-exist and procreate with Rufus over the course of an indeterminate number of months, resulting in two unwanted pregnancies. However, despite her callous designation as breeder and the subsequent sexual violence

³²⁰ Mattie Fannen, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

³²¹ Lindy Patton, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

³²² Catherine Williams, interview with T. Pat Matthews, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2.

³²³ Rose Williams, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

entailed in such a designation, Williams was able to identify and seize opportunities to claim (nominal and highly contested) space for her own needs and desires.

In “Searching for Climax,” Lindsey and Johnson argue that rather than “depicting [African American women*]...as once again becoming the property of someone else,”³²⁴ it is imperative to instead address the ways these individuals worked (within the contexts characterizing their realities) to “steal bodies back from masters.”³²⁵ For Rose Williams, this theft was initiated at the outset of the years-long ordeal to which she was subjected. After watching Rufus climb into her bunk and being made aware at last of just what “living with” him would entail, Williams recounts:

...I puts de feet ‘gainst him and give him a shove and out he go on de floor ‘fore he knew what I’s doin’. Dat nigger jump up and he mad. He look like de wild bear. He starts for de bunk and I jumps quick fer de poker. It am ‘bout three feet long and when he comes at me I lets him have it over de head. Did dat nigger stop in he tracks? I’s say he did...’Stay away from dis nigger, dat all I wants,’ I say, and jus’ sets and hold dat poker in de hand. He jus’ sets, lookin’ like de bull. Dere we’uns sets and sets for ‘bout an hour and den he go out and I bars de door.³²⁶

By forcibly ejecting her would-be attacker from their shared bed and eventually barring his entry to the cabin itself, Williams was able to lay claim to both her (literally bought and sold) body and the space of the plantation—a move complicated not only by her role as unpaid laborer, but also by her prior receipt of “Massa Hawkins” (faux) benevolence. (As Williams points out toward the beginning of her narrative, Hawkins’ earlier decision to purchase Rose at auction along with her parents was often presented as

³²⁴ Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 190.

³²⁵ Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 187.

³²⁶ Rose Williams, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

an act of kindness, which the young woman's later reticence to reproduce for the purposes of her enslaver's economic gain seemingly disregarded.) In fact, when confronted about his decision to 'breed' Williams with a man she despised, Hawkins wondered aloud at his slave's ingratitude and told her point blank, "Woman, I's pay big money for you and...if you doesn't want whippin' at de stake, yous do what I wants."³²⁷

Nevertheless, Williams resisted such specious appeals to her sense of obligation both during her stint as an enslaved laborer as well as in the years proceeding Emancipation. At the conclusion of their conversation, Williams relates to her interviewer, "I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience [with heterosexual couplng] am 'nough for dis nigger. After what I does for the massa, I's never wants no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but He have to 'scuse me and look for some others to 'plenish de earth."³²⁸

By refusing to have "truck" with any potential male suitors after Emancipation, Williams—like countless other Black enslaved women* with similar (dis)inclinations—reasserted authority over her body, in direct and conscious defiance of the prescribed existential templates by which such individuals were expected to organize their lives.

This is also true of North Carolinian Sarah Gudger, who was equally blunt about her reasons for refusing to marry. Purportedly born circa 1816, Gudger's exact date of birth would remain a point of contention throughout her later years, given that she passed in 1938 and would, therefore, have been 122 years old at the time of her death. Her vivid

³²⁷ Rose Williams, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

³²⁸ Rose Williams, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

recollections of neighborhood events from the early part of the nineteenth century as well as her detailed memories of the 1833 North American meteor shower known as the falling of the stars would, however, seem to corroborate reports of her having been born prior to 1820. Gudger was found living in a “comfortably furnished”³²⁹ two-story frame house with a set of distant cousins in Asheville around 1836. Her household ostensibly included a male relative who affirmed, in a bid to verify Gudger’s age, that he had “known Sarah all his life and that she was an old woman when he was a young boy.”³³⁰ Upon eagerly agreeing to be interviewed, Gudger shared numerous stories about her long and eventful life, which included decades of bondage, grueling labor, and painful family separations but—interestingly enough—neither marriage (before or after Emancipation) nor biological motherhood.

“‘No I ain’t never been married,’ Aunt Sarah once told a questioner,” according to her obituary in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, “‘I have raised a heap of children for other folks. I didn’t marry because I had enough trouble by myself without taking on anymore.’”³³¹ This explanation is striking in its elucidation of Gudger’s self-identified inclinations and capacities. That is, while she appears to embrace and even consistently welcome the rigors and demands of child-rearing (namely, the raising of ‘heaps of children’ to whom she did not give birth), Gudger spurns the prospect of heterosexual

³²⁹ Sarah Gudger, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter*.

³³⁰ “‘Aunt’ Sarah Gudger, Ex-Slave, Dies In Her Sleep At Age 122,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 20, 1938.

³³¹ “‘Aunt’ Sarah Gudger, Ex-Slave, Dies In Her Sleep At Age 122,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 20, 1938.

marriage as a form of trouble with which she could not, in the entirety of her 122 years of life, be bothered.

Gudger's story parallels that of Mandy from Alabama in a number of compelling ways. When asked about children, Mandy discloses that she gave birth to three of her own, but sadly lost them all in infancy. She explains that she had, however, "'dopted...a baby boy" because "a little bitty girl borned him, an' she didn't want him. She said she'd kill him, an' [Mandy] didn't want her to git in no trouble, so [she] token him."³³² Unlike Sarah Gudger, however, Mandy also went on to marry, but soon found this to be a needlessly stressful arrangement.

"Dis yer husband whut I got now, he don't do nothing but jealous [jealous] me," Mandy complains, referencing her husband's wariness toward what he believed to be his wife's infidelity. Mandy notes that such suspicion was unwarranted however, adding, "Look lak he'd know *I didn' want no man*, but jes' fer company"³³³ [emphasis mine]. That is, Mandy expected her husband, of all people, to be aware of her disinterest in men—an expectation that perhaps provides some insight into the two's marriage. Later in the transcript, Mandy returns to the subject of children in order to clarify "I allus wanted chillun, a house plum full of 'em, [and] I done los' all I could mek...Effen I could of had me some widout 'em I never would of had any husband a tall. No'am."³³⁴ In no uncertain

³³² Mandy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

³³³ Mandy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

³³⁴ Mandy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young*.

terms, then, Mandy was delineating her marriage as something she sought not as a natural outcropping of affection and attraction, but solely as a means to an end.

Georgian Snovey Jackson avoided such compromises entirely, explaining—in a narrative move similar to the one deployed in the transcript of Edward Lycurgas—that she “ain’t never been married, never had no chillun, and de niggers says [she’s] always been a house-bird [homebody].”³³⁵ This description, however, seems to conflict with Jackson’s own understandings of self, which hinged on a sort of thwarted mobility and desire for ascension. She discusses in detail the lengths to which she went in earlier days to acquire (and retain) a significant amount of land, despite numerous attempts to prevent her from doing so; Jackson boasts about having used her acumen and savvy to sell off small tracts on her own terms and positions herself as “de foundation of dem homes you see there” (on the lots she previously held). When reflecting on this series of what she considers to be strategic coups, Jackson admits that her largest regret in life is *not* her decision not to wed or procreate, but rather that she was unable to put her myriad talents to further use.

“I could be a grand counselor now,” she speculates wistfully, adding, “If I could live my days over I’d show ‘em all sumpin’. Like a rollin’ stone, up and down, so de world go’n’ move on. I been a heap o’ help to folks in my day. I done made a way out o’ no way.”³³⁶ Indeed, Jackson’s ‘help’ had spurred a slew of development around where

³³⁵ Snovey Jackson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones*.

³³⁶ Snovey Jackson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones*.

she was living out her final years; WPA worker Ruth Chitty reports that at the time of her interview, Jackson was comfortably settled in a “cabin set in the heart of a respectable white neighborhood.” She adds, “Surrounded by white neighbors, [Snovey Jackson] goes her serene, independent way”³³⁷—thus painting her subject as neither anti-social “house-bird” nor disgraced old maid with “no chances,”³³⁸ but rather as a woman* contented with her choices and divested from the impositions of cisheteropatriarchal customs.

And while one might question whether the enslaved and formerly enslaved African American women* who neglected to marry did so of their own fruition or due to a lack of viable options, the transcript of Arkansan Henrietta Ralls provides ample evidence of the former. Born in Lee County, Mississippi, in March of 1850, Ralls moved (or rather was brought, on foot, by “old master...Henry Ralls”) to Arkansas at the age of ten. In the years following Emancipation, she “hired out—cooked, milked cows and washed and ironed,”³³⁹ but never wed.

“I never been married,” Ralls discloses before clarifying that, “I could have married, but I didn’t. I don’t hardly know why.”³⁴⁰ This admission can perhaps best be understood not as a declaration of remorse or even indifference, but opacity. Her reasons for not marrying are her own, and though she declines to share them with interviewer

³³⁷ Snovey Jackson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones*.

³³⁸ Betty Hodge, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3, Gadson-Isom*.

³³⁹ Henrietta Ralls, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁴⁰ Henrietta Ralls, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

Bernice Bowden, it seems to be the case that—as with many of her contemporaries—Ralls’ marital status did not serve as a source of despair. Indeed, in spite of the financial hurdles facing Black women* of her time who found themselves without husbands or long-term partners, Ralls appears to take pride in her life-long self-sufficiency, telling Bowden that she had “been makin’ [her] own livin’ pretty much since she left [her] father,”³⁴¹ with whom she lived back in Mississippi after the War. Her narrative and those like it underscore the fact that although, as Tera Hunter points out, “marriage was by no means synonymous with freedom, but slave and free Blacks knew that their future as liberated people was less certain without the guarantee of marriage,”³⁴² many Black women* forwent such guarantees in favor of subversive independence.

Still others lamented the loss of this very brand of independence, as multiple WPA participants spoke openly about regretting having entered into heterosexual marriages. The transcript of Dora Richard, living at the time of her interview in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is indicative of this regret. Richard begins by detailing the experiences of her youth, including the period during which she attended school—a time she claims she “never will forget.” Though she was obligated to walk “four miles there and four miles back—eight miles a day,”³⁴³ Richard seems to relish these memories, perhaps in

³⁴¹ Henrietta Ralls, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁴² Tera Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018): 7.

³⁴³ Dora Richard, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

part due to the relative inaccessibility of education for many Black people in the U.S., even after Emancipation.

Eventually Richard did find herself leaving these pursuits behind, however, and starting a family—one that included “about ten children.”³⁴⁴ She appeared to find little joy in this role, though, confessing (rather bluntly) that she “felt better when she was under [her] mother ‘cause when [she] married [her] life was over.”³⁴⁵ Indeed, throughout the course of her narrative, Richard never even so much as mentions her husband, opting instead to focus on the “good times”³⁴⁶ she had with her parents before embarking on a new life as a (reluctant) wife and mother.

North Carolinian Charity McAllister—who was around 18 years of age “when de Yankees come”³⁴⁷ and who “wus married right after the War”³⁴⁸—expresses a similar ambivalence toward matrimony. In her interview with WPA worker T. Pat Matthews, McAllister discloses that “De second year after de War, [she] married Richard Rogers, but [she] kept the name of McAllister”³⁴⁹ (inherited from her mother, formerly enslaved by a Jennett McAllister in Harnett County). While this in itself could be interpreted as an

³⁴⁴ Dora Richard, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁴⁵ Dora Richard, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁴⁶ Dora Richard, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁴⁷ Charity McAllister, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*.

³⁴⁸ Charity McAllister, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*.

³⁴⁹ Charity McAllister, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*.

unwillingness to fully commit herself to the social and personal demands of nineteenth century marriage, her next admission proves even more illuminating.

“My husband been dead a good long time. Lawd, I don’t know how long,”³⁵⁰ McAllister explains toward the end of her recollections, before adding, tellingly, “I been married one time, *and dat wus one time too much*”³⁵¹ [emphasis mine].

This seeming neutrality (or even resentment) toward husbands past and present is echoed in the reminiscences of Missourian Ann Ulrich Evans, who frames her marriage to Moses Evans not as a matter of love or desire, but rather as a survival strategy. After being rendered homeless post-Emancipation by a plantation owner who ran her off of his property for socializing with an adversary, Ann “asked Moses...to please buy [her] some shoes...[And] sure ‘nough, when Saturday night come, he buyed [her] some shoes, and handkerchiefs and a pretty string of beads and got an old man neighbor...to let [her] stay at his house.”³⁵² Within a few weeks the two had wed, and Evans confesses that she “was mighty glad to marry him to git a place to stay...Hard times as I was having if I seed a man walking with two sticks and he wanted me for a wife I’d marry him to git a place to stay. Yes I did and I meant just that.”³⁵³

In this, Evans’ narrative echoes that of countless others in the WPA collection, wherein Black women* recount being forced to navigate a social landscape in which

³⁵⁰ Charity McAllister, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*.

³⁵¹ Charity McAllister, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*.

³⁵² Ann Ulrich Evans, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

³⁵³ Ann Ulrich Evans, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

heterosexual marriage, desired or otherwise, was one of the few options “to better [their] living” readily available. Given a context in which such decisions often had to be made based on limited choices and overwhelming economic constraints, it is useful to consider how women* like Evans may have chosen otherwise if they had access to different, more capacious options and fewer such constraints. How might African American women* have lived if they were not made to live in such proximity to persistent deprivation and fatal scarcity? The stories of those who, like Rebecca Jackson, refused to capitulate to cisheteronormative expectation even in the face of such deprivations might offer something of a glimpse into this realm of possibility.

For some, these refusals often involved a renouncing of the reproductive demands on which the chattel slavery system was predicated, with many enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women* not only abstaining from marriage, but from biological motherhood as well. Such abstinence was necessarily marked as non-normative, given the material consequences facing those who failed to reproduce: childless emancipated women*, for instance, faced the prospect of growing old without adult offspring to provide for them (in the midst of the Great Depression, no less), whereas enslaved women* who spurned procreation were met with an equally grim fate.

These individuals, often designated by enslavers as “bad breeders,”³⁵⁴ generally risked being sold away as poor investments. Such was the case of Oklahoman Sarah

³⁵⁴ Jenifer Barclay, “Bad Breeders and Monstrosities: Racializing Childlessness and Congenital Disabilities in Slavery and Freedom,” *Slavery & Abolition* 38 (2017).

Wilson's sister Lottie, who was "sold off...because she wouldn't have a baby."³⁵⁵

Though Wilson's description limns Lottie as perhaps one of the many "enslaved women [who] engaged in gynecological resistance by using contraception, procuring abortions, or committing infanticide to exercise agency and deny slaveholders the wealth their children literally embodied,"³⁵⁶ it also underscores the perils confronting those who attempted to utilize these forms of resistance. Despite this reality, however, many African American women* asserted their procreative agency in a range of subversive ways that compel us to consider the means by which these women* might have envisioned the very concepts of kinship and selfhood.

Take for instance the enigmatic Mandy Buford. Following a series of circumstances not elaborated on in the WPA transcript, Buford came to stay with the formerly enslaved Lucindy Allison and her husband up until the time of her death. Allison relates that while she and her family worked the fields during the day (after Emancipation), Buford usually sat around and smoked as the younger children played nearby. Given Mandy's advanced age, however, this fact did not seem to rankle, and Allison even goes on to describe the "cob pipes and cut cane j'int's" her sons made for Buford "to draw through."³⁵⁷ Seemingly accepting of (and perhaps even amused by) her boarder's numerous idiosyncrasies, Allison offers a lengthy recitation of Buford's pre-

³⁵⁵ Sarah Wilson, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 13, Oklahoma, Adams-Young*.

³⁵⁶ Barclay, "Bad Breeders and Monstrosities," 290.

³⁵⁷ That is, Allison's sons use corncobs to craft pipes for Buford to smoke from (or "draw through").

War labor conditions, which she depicts as having been intimately tied to Mandy's procreative productivity (or lack thereof).

"Aunt Mandy said her master would be telling them what to do in the field and he say to her, 'I talking to you too,'" Allison recalls. "She worked right among the men at the same kind of work. She was tall but not large. She carried children on her right hip when she was so young she dragged that foot when she walked. The reason she had to go with the men to the field like she did was 'cause *she wasn't no multiplying woman*. She never had a chile in all her lifetime"³⁵⁸ [emphasis mine].

Buford spurned any and all procreative fulfillments inherent to her position, never producing "a chile in all her lifetime." Indeed, children are associated with Mandy Buford almost entirely in ways that symbolically reinforce her maternal disinclinations: according to Allison, the babies Mandy was made to carry on her hip during her stint as an enslaved laborer literally and figuratively weighed her down.

This is reminiscent of the account Arkansan Mattie Fannen gives of her early years, in which she recollects, "I worked for [my enslaver's] second wife, Miss Sally. I nursed for a long time...[and] got many whoopings on [the children's] blame. I'd drap 'em, leave 'em, pinch 'em, quit walking 'em and rocking 'em. I got tired of them all the time."³⁵⁹ In fact, Fannen admits, she "[doesn't] like children yet on that account,"³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ Lucindy Allison, interview with Irene Robertson, WPA Slave Narrative Project, Volume 2, Part 1.

³⁵⁹ Mattie Fannen, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2*.

³⁶⁰ Mattie Fannen, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2*.

despite the fact that she did eventually give birth to at least one of her own. By refusing to do the same, Buford eluded both the onus of mothering and perhaps to some extent—given that “enslaved women categorized as especially fertile...[were often] targets for sexual exploitation”³⁶¹—the burden of sexual normativity.

However, it is of course possible that Buford “never ha[ving] a chile in all her lifetime” was a matter of infertility rather than one of personal preference. Indeed, as Jenifer Barclay points out, “within the history of slavery, the absence of pregnancy and childbirth among enslaved women is typically ignored, mentioned briefly, or framed as an act of resistance”³⁶²—a portrayal that too often leaves little room to examine the lives of “enslaved women who did not take deliberate, conscious measures to avoid or end pregnancy, remain childless, or forego motherhood.”³⁶³ Allison’s insistence on depicting Buford’s relationship to children (and procreation more broadly) as one of vexation, though, points to a more subversive explanation.

In *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*, Ned and Constance Sublette evaluate the transcript of formerly enslaved Texan Mary Gaffney, who—after admitting that she “hated the man” she was forced to marry—adds:

I would not let that negro touch me and he told Maser and Maser gave me a real good whipping, so that night I let that negro have his way...But I still cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the

³⁶¹ Barclay, “Bad Breeders and Monstrosities,” 290.

³⁶² Barclay, “Bad Breeders and Monstrosities,” 290.

³⁶³ Barclay, “Bad Breeders and Monstrosities,” 290.

matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know or catch me, so I never did have any children...³⁶⁴

Thus, it is plausible that women* like Mandy weren't the ones who couldn't reproduce, but rather the ones who *wouldn't*. Mandy Buford's refusals, then, (and those of others like her) reflect the diverse and insurgent means by which such individuals positioned themselves within—and outside—the category of normative womanhood.

Buford's narrative sheds light on that of Missourian Sarah Graves, whose account of her mother's experiences during enslavement prove especially illuminative. Graves begins with the painful memory of being moved away from her father upon leaving Kentucky in her youth, "'cause he was allotted [hired out] to another man."³⁶⁵ Her mother was never told where her husband was located, as her enslavers "knowed she would never marry so long as she knew where he was [and they] wanted her to marry again and raise more children to be slaves."³⁶⁶ In spite of (or rather due to) these efforts to render her powerless in regard to her own romantic and reproductive options, however, Graves' mother vowed she would "never marry again to have children"³⁶⁷ and took the necessary steps to ensure that she never did.

"She married my stepfather, Trattle Barber" Graves explains, "'cause he was sick and could never be a father."³⁶⁸ Though Graves' mother was apparently never reunited

³⁶⁴ Constance Sublette and Ned Sublette, *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry* (Chicago, Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 2016): 26.

³⁶⁵ Sarah Graves, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

³⁶⁶ Sarah Graves, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

³⁶⁷ Sarah Graves, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

³⁶⁸ Sarah Graves, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

with the husband from whom she was separated (““they never wanted mama to know where papa was, an’ she never did,” sighed Aunt Sally”),³⁶⁹ her decision to marry a man with whom she could not procreate served as an intentional and significant act of rebellion to the corporeal claims being made at her expense.

Lindy Henderson, born after the War but living at the time of her WPA interview with formerly enslaved South Carolinian Sallie Paul, offers a telling response to the expectations Black women* faced in regard to their reproductive capacities. Upon hearing Paul’s recollection that enslavers would “get [a] handful of switches and whip de nigger chillun round de legs, but wouldn’ never whip none of de grown ‘omans cause they was breedin’,”³⁷⁰ Henderson responds, “My Lord, child, reckon dey would bout beat me to death if I been livin’ den cause I done had two husbands en ain’ never bear no child yet.”³⁷¹

Rather than express disappointment over her infertility, however, Henderson tells WPA worker Annie Ruth Davis, “Honey, I lies down in dat bed dere at night en thanks my God dat I ain’ never had dat operation”³⁷² (required, according to her doctor, for Henderson to be able to have children). She adds that she “thanks [God] a thousand times...dat I been make like I is. [It’s] a blessin’, honey, a blessin’.”³⁷³ This framing of

³⁶⁹ Sarah Graves, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger*.

³⁷⁰ Sallie Paul, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

³⁷¹ Sallie Paul, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

³⁷² Sallie Paul, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

³⁷³ Sallie Paul, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

childlessness as a form of freedom—a blessing, even—likely reflected the attitudes of enslaved African American women* like Mandy Buford and Sarah Graves’ mother who negotiated and oftentimes outright rejected motherhood in their attempts to “steal bodies back from masters.”³⁷⁴

REBECCA JACKSON AND A RELEASE FROM BONDAGE

Following her 1830 religious conversion (and 1831 renunciation of marital sex), Rebecca Jackson embarked on what would turn out to be the somewhat onerous task of using her “gifts” in service to her community. In the case of her husband, Samuel, these gifts were deployed as a means of establishing a firm and impassable boundary within their relationship. This process involved, from the outset, a series of miraculous acts that Jackson performed on a consistent basis as testaments to her both her faith and the utter inaccessibility of her body. For instance, “in [an] account of her return home in an ecstatic state...following sanctification,” Humez writes, “[Jackson undertook] a display of her amazing invulnerability to physical pain.”³⁷⁵ The ‘display’ referenced here included multiple instances of Jackson “marching” from the cellar door of her home to the stove above with her eyes closed (somehow managing, to her husband’s amazement, not to fall down the stairs) as well as repeatedly placing her hands on the stovetop without appearing to burn her skin. According to Jackson, these two feats convinced Samuel of her validity and “caused [him] to believe that it was more than nature”³⁷⁶ that

³⁷⁴ Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 187.

³⁷⁵ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

³⁷⁶ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

allowed her to achieve them, and yet he persisted in seeking to continue their sexual relationship, even over his wife’s strenuous objections.

Though “the message to her husband—that her body [was] no longer even hers, let alone his—could not be plainer”³⁷⁷ (and though Samuel was regularly in attendance at Rebecca’s prayer meetings and in many ways seemed to be otherwise on board with his wife’s religious doctrines), Jackson still struggled to successfully “persuade her husband that it was not she...who wanted to end their sexual relationship but rather the overwhelming force of the divine Spirit that inhabited, moved, and possessed her.”³⁷⁸ Only by doing so would she be able to “regain control over the sexual use of her own body.”³⁷⁹

After a time, Jackson began traveling outside the greater Philadelphia area in order to speak with various assemblages and spread her religious message. Upon returning home from one such trip, on which she was “gone four weeks,” Rebecca came to find that her “very life was at stake.”³⁸⁰ She writes that she was “commanded” after her speaking tour “to tell Samuel [she] had served him many years, and had tried to please him, but [she] could not. And now from this day and forever, [she would] never strive again.”³⁸¹ Predictably, the drawing of this particular line in the sand garnered no small amount of ire from Jackson’s husband, and from the moment of this proclamation, he

³⁷⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

³⁷⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

³⁷⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

³⁸⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 145.

³⁸¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 147.

“sought [her] life day and night”³⁸² (that is, he attempted to kill her). The means and extent of this intended violence are not elaborated on, as Jackson explains “to mention all that [she] passed would fill [an entire] book,”³⁸³ but she speculates that if not for the ‘gift’ of foresight “given to [her] at the beginning” of her religious journey (which allowed her to anticipate and prevent her husband’s movements), she would surely have fallen “in death by [Samuel’s] hands.”³⁸⁴ This grim reality is representative of the ways the fight for bodily autonomy within Jackson’s given context was often a violently contested one, especially for Black women*, who were subject to not only racial, but patriarchal brutality as well.

Eventually, though Samuel “tried all ways that was in his power, [he] found that he [had] failed,”³⁸⁵ in his malicious endeavors, at which point he confessed his wickedness, begged Jackson’s forgiveness, and offered her the following (tearful) benediction:

Now, Rebecca, *you may sleep at your own house*, I will trouble you no more. Go forth and do the will of God. I know that He has called you to do a work and I have tried to hinder you until I have suffered everything but death. Nobody but you knows what I have suffered in this house for trying to stop you. I know you are a woman of God—He has showed it unto me. I am a wicked man, but I will not hurt you now, though I would have done it before. But you need not be afraid of me now, I never will trouble you³⁸⁶ [emphasis mine].

382 Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 145.

383 Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 145.

384 Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 145.

385 Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 145.

386 Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 146.

Interestingly (and revealingly), Rebecca refers to this turn of events as her “release from bondage”³⁸⁷—a declaration made all the more stunning by the fact that Jackson lived in the time of (and was often deeply emotionally impacted by) U.S. chattel slavery. That she would liken her marriage and the (in this case, sexual) expectations bound up with it to life in bondage speaks to the depth of her dissatisfaction with the institution. As Humez posits, “Although she may not have done so with full consciousness, [Jackson had] used her religious experience both to win independence from her husband and to justify her desire for independence. She represented this process in her writings as strenuous, even dangerous, but she does not seem to have felt grief or loss when the marriage came to an end.”³⁸⁸

This was true also of other Black women* in the archive who refused to remarry after being widowed or, like Jackson, left husbands behind in their bids for self-actualization. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic of this bunch is Arkansan Millie Johnson, known to friends and acquaintances as “Old Bill.” Born in Caledonia, Arkansas prior to the conclusion of the Civil War, Johnson appears to have married fairly early in life, but brags about her wild youth and the resultant separation from her husband.

“After I got grown I run around terrible,” she confesses, adding, “My husband quit me a long time ago.”³⁸⁹ This framing, however, downplays the seeming evidence that it was less a matter of Old Bill having been ‘quit’ by the man she married than her

³⁸⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 147.

³⁸⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 19.

³⁸⁹ Millie Johnson (Old Bill), *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

essentially running him off. “The white folks [former enslavers] let me have my way,” Johnson continues, “They said I was mean and if my husband fooled with me, told me to shoot him.”³⁹⁰ Whether or not gunplay ever became necessary, Johnson does not divulge, but it is clear that, like Jackson, Bill’s marriage came to an unceremonious end without engendering any discernible feelings of “grief or loss.”³⁹¹ In fact, Johnson’s primary concern throughout the bulk of her narrative is not her romantic reality but rather her efforts to heal from a recently inflamed old rattlesnake wound in order to be able relocate to her hometown of Caledonia.

A similar indifference characterizes the transcript of fellow Arkansan Jane Reece. Like others in the collection, Reece spends a fair amount of time detailing her various vocational paths and physical capabilities, both of which she seems to view as central to her ongoing self-sufficiency. “I used to be terrible ‘bout cookin’, washin’, and ironin’,” Reece admits before adding “Ever’thing a man ever done I’ve done—cut wood, cut down sprouts, burn brush—I done everything.”³⁹² The one thing she *didn’t* do, however, was remain with the (unnamed) man she wed at some point in her youth, a fact she remarks on only briefly, when she notes, “I left my husband back there [presumably on the plantation on which she was enslaved] and come here to Arkansas with my mother.”³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Millie Johnson (Old Bill), *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

³⁹¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 19.

³⁹² Jane Reece, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

³⁹³ Jane Reece, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6, Quinn-Tuttle*.

There is no mention of Reece ever remarrying and the topic of her ex-husband is not revisited within the text.

And while Reece abandoned her husband to make an inter-state move with her mother (among, perhaps, other reasons), Georgian Susan Castle seems to have spurned her sole marriage prospect at the behest of her own. “I was engaged [once], but I didn’t marry though,” Castle tells WPA worker Sadie Hornsby, “‘cause my mudder ‘posed me marryin’.”³⁹⁴ Once again, the decision to remain single seems to cause Susan little distress; indeed, “when asked about marriage customs, she [laughs]”³⁹⁵ before sharing with Hornsby the details of her own stymied betrothal.

Georgia resident Mary Gladdy’s quite explicitly stated reasons for not (re)marrying, on the other hand, were entirely her own, and are reminiscent of the very exigencies that caused Rebecca Jackson to seek her “release from bondage” from husband Samuel prior to the couple’s formal separation. “I have had one husband and no children,” Gladdy explains, “[And] I became a widow about 35 years ago[;] I have since remained one because I find that I can serve God better when I am not bothered with a Negro man.”³⁹⁶ Harkening back to Sarah Gudger’s characterization of heterosexual marriage as the “taking on”³⁹⁷ of unnecessary trouble, Gladdy compounds this writing off of matrimony by framing men as distractions from her religious practice. This move

³⁹⁴ Susan Castle, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr.*

³⁹⁵ Susan Castle, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr.*

³⁹⁶ Mary Gladdy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones.*

³⁹⁷ Sarah Gudger, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1, Adams-Hunter.*

aligns her narrative with that of Jackson's in intriguing ways, beginning with her conversion forty years earlier, which also came about as the "result of a hair-raising experience"³⁹⁸ (though in Gladdy's case this experience involved not a thunderstorm, but a ghost).

"For more than thirty years," the interviewer elaborates, "the Lord has been revealing His work, and many other things, to Mary Gladdy. For more than twenty years she has been experiencing 'visitations of the spirit' ...in the 'dead hours of the night' [that] impel her to write in an unknown hand."³⁹⁹ The matter of her writing (and reading) is particularly interesting given that "Gladdy claims to have never attended school or been privately taught in her life...When asked how she mastered the art of reading, she replied: 'the Lord revealed it to me.'"⁴⁰⁰

This account is eerily similar to the explanation Rebecca Jackson provides in *Gifts of Power* concerning her ability to read and write, despite having never been instructed on how to do so. Born outside of Philadelphia in 1795, Jackson spent some portion of her childhood living with her mother Jane Wisson (or Wilson) and multiple siblings, the care of whom largely fell to Rebecca. Given this, Jackson reports being the only of her mother's children not to receive any kind of formal education—a fact that becomes a point of contention shortly after her initial spiritual epiphany.

³⁹⁸ Mary Gladdy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones.*

³⁹⁹ Mary Gladdy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones.*

⁴⁰⁰ Mary Gladdy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones.*

“After I received the blessing of God, I had a great desire to read the Bible,” Jackson recalls, “[But] I am the only child of my mother that had not learning. And now, having the charge of my brother and his six children to see to, and my husband, and taking in sewing for a living, I saw no way that I could now get learning without my brother would give me [lessons.]”⁴⁰¹ Though these lessons went to plan for a time, however, eventually Jackson’s brother Joseph began returning home from work too tired to continue them, and “it would grieve [her]” to such an extent that Rebecca found herself having to “pray to God to give [her] power over [her] feelings that [she] might not think hard of [him].”⁴⁰² These prayers offered Jackson some comfort, and she was able to resign herself to using Joseph as a transcriber of her written correspondence. This though, in turn, led to a new source of conflict.

One day, Joseph was “awriting a letter in answer to one he had just read. [Rebecca] told him what to put in, then...asked him to read.” As he moved to comply, Jackson realized that he had “‘put in more than [she] told [him].’ This he done several times.”⁴⁰³ (Joseph’s unapproved edits were likely an attempt to censor what he would have viewed as his sister’s more radical religious messages, as he took issue with portions of her platform—including the call for celibacy—and at times even seemed to question Jackson’s sanity.) Exasperated, Rebecca reiterated, “I don’t want thee to word

⁴⁰¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 107.

⁴⁰² Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 107.

⁴⁰³ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 107.

my letter. I only want thee to write it,” to which Joseph replied, “Sister, thee is the hardest one I ever wrote for!”⁴⁰⁴

Wounded, Jackson retreated to her room, prayed for a solution to her predicament, and found that when next she “looked on the Word,”⁴⁰⁵ she was miraculously able to read it. Once again, Jackson’s religious engagements offered her a source of protection from the imposition of patriarchal limitations (levied, in this case, by her brother Joseph) as well as avenues to agency—a matter that will be taken up at greater length in the following chapter. What is striking about both Mary Gladdy and Rebecca Jackson’s tales of divinely-bestowed literacy and hard-won self-determination are the means by which men are positioned within them primarily as hindrances and liabilities; in going around them or refusing to seek them out entirely, these two women* set the parameters for their own lives without deference to the norms and standards expected of them. In this, they were like countless other antebellum and postbellum African American women*, whose refusals created space for unconventional yet liberatory existential possibilities.

CONCLUSION: REBECCA’S FLIGHT

Rebecca Jackson’s move to Shakerism was a fraught one, marked and perhaps ultimately spurred by her increasing dissatisfaction with and alienation from the churches of her youth, and the growing ire of the Black religious community she had once called

⁴⁰⁴ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 107.

⁴⁰⁵ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 108.

home. Jackson details in her written recollections her condemnation at the hands of clerical leaders who accused her of having “parted a great many men and their wives,”⁴⁰⁶ as well as of preaching a false doctrine. She recalls that by 1835 (five years after her conversion), “persecution was raging on every side,”⁴⁰⁷ with Methodist ministers telling “trustees not to let [her] speak in the church nor in any of the houses”⁴⁰⁸ unless they were willing to risk being “turned out of the church.”⁴⁰⁹

In the fall of 1837 Jackson attempted to confront these antagonisms head-on, asking to be tried for heresy (hoping, of course, to be cleared)—a move that, though she was never actually tried, brought about the “definitive end”⁴¹⁰ of Rebecca’s relationship with her brother, Joseph. Even amidst all this turmoil, however, Jackson continued on with her various prayer meetings and speaking engagements, finding that soon “many [new] friends [rose] up,”⁴¹¹ even as others departed.

One such “friend” (though the date and circumstances of their meeting is notably absent from Jackson’s writing) winds up being Rebecca Perot, a sort of spiritual mentee with whom Jackson would end up spending the rest of her life. Their story—which will be taken up at length in the following chapter—is rife with glimpses of queer kinship. And though also riddled with silences, it highlights the ways nineteenth century Black

⁴⁰⁶ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 149.

⁴⁰⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 152.

⁴⁰⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 152.

⁴⁰⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 152.

⁴¹⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 151.

⁴¹¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 154.

women* resisted heteropatriarchal impositions, attempted to make space for their non-normative desires, and sought to shape their own realities.

Chapter Four: “I Love Aunt Polly So Good:” Queering Connections Between Black Women*

In March of 1828, Mrs. Alletha Smith of Calvert County, Maryland was deposed in connection with the case of Susannah Rawlings, a slaveholder who was in the process of seeking restitution. Fourteen years prior, three of the people Rawlings enslaved—a young man named Alexander, a teenaged boy named Peter, and a woman in her mid to late thirties named Minty—had fled her property and secured their liberation via the British troops stationed at the time along the Patuxent River. Shortly after their escape, sworn witness George Ireland testifies, Alexander (nicknamed Sawney) was spotted sporting a gun and in the company of a British officer, indicating that he “no doubt belonged to the marine forces.”⁴¹² This same year, Ireland also reports having seen Minty “in the British service a washing” (that is working as a laundress); he notes that both individuals had been “entirely lost to their mistress ever since.”⁴¹³

In her deposition, Alletha Smith makes no such claims as to the whereabouts of those formerly enslaved by Rawlings, but rather provides biographical information on the three that proves revealing. “Alexander or Sawney,” Smith explains, “went by the name of Covington[;] Peter being but a youth had no surname positively but at times called himself Rawlings. Minty had two surnames[,] Gurry...and Caden.”⁴¹⁴ For reasons that

⁴¹² Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁴¹³ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁴¹⁴ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

are not entirely clear, Smith opts to elaborate on this final detail, adding, “[Minty] had a husband by the name of Joe Gurry, the property of Thomas Ireland... a short time after there [sic] marriage they fell out and parted, she then formed an intimacy with a negro woman... by the name of Philis Caden... [and she] adopted that name as... Minty Caden[.] As such she went to the British in the year 1814.”⁴¹⁵

Though mentioned casually, almost as an aside, this divulgence represents a useful insight into nineteenth century Black women’s* relationships with one another as well as how those relationships were perceived within the larger society in which they took place. As Clare Sears points out, Minty’s story (though available only through scant traces in the archive) provides evidence of “the existence of same-sex relationships among enslaved women as well as their acknowledgement by whites.”⁴¹⁶ Perhaps more important than such acknowledgement on the part of enslavers and white neighbors, however, are the means by which these women* understood their participation in non-heterosexual, intraracial trysts—how they envisioned themselves as bound not by the normative, but rather by their own desires, and how they organized their lives in diverse and often queer ways.

DESIRE, DREAMS, AND THE QUESTION OF CELIBACY

Born in modern-day Senegal circa 1754, the person who would eventually come to be known as Phillis Wheatley was abducted while still a young child and forcibly

⁴¹⁵ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁴¹⁶ Clare Sears, “Centering Slavery in Nineteenth Century Queer History (1800s-1890s),” *The Routledge History of Queer America*, edited by Don Romesburg (New York, New York: Routledge, 2019): 40.

relocated to Massachusetts.⁴¹⁷ There, she was “bought for a trifle”⁴¹⁸ by Susanna Wheatley, the wife of a successful Boston merchant, whose intention was to train Phillis as a personal servant to her and her husband as they approached old age. The enslaved girl quickly demonstrated an impressive capacity for poetry writing and language acquisition, and by 1767 she had already published her first poem. Her subsequent, often elegiac compositions—which included a book entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*—garnered widespread acclaim both in the U.S. and abroad, rendering Wheatley (at least for a time) something of a local celebrity and a fixture in fashionable New England literary circles. It is her other, initially unpublished writings, however—namely her personal correspondences with friends and acquaintances—that, in their departure from the often impersonal tone of her poetry, provide revealing glimpses of Phillis’ life and relationships.

Wheatley’s letters to Obour Tanner—a fellow enslaved woman* living at the time in Newport, Rhode Island—prove especially telling, as they “reveal a friendship that asks us to consider what pleasure and friendship might look like to two enslaved women”⁴¹⁹ living in pre-Emancipation New England. These letters are emblematic of the ways Black women* sustained intimacies with one another across space and time, in spite of the limitations imposed by the strictures of chattel slavery. Spanning the years between 1772

⁴¹⁷ Susan Clair Imbarrato and Carol Berkin, “Wheatley, Phillis,” *Encyclopedia of American Literature*, (Facts On File, 2013).

⁴¹⁸ Wilfred Samuels, “Wheatley, Phillis,” *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature* (Facts On File, 2013).

⁴¹⁹ Tara Bynum, “Phillis Wheatley on Friendship,” *Legacy* 31 (2014): 43.

and 1779, Tanner and Wheatley's ongoing epistolary exchanges centered on the two women's* shared faith, ailing enslavers, and—most notably—their growing affection for one another.

Even as Wheatley's missives grew shorter and more succinct due to the reduction in 'leisure' time she experienced after her mid-1770s manumission, they simultaneously grew more personal and effusive in nature; the poet went from writing primarily of practical matters involving book sales and spiritual maxims to penning tender reassurances and pleas for communication marked by longing.

In a letter dated May 10, 1779, for instance, Phillis writes to Tanner "tho' I have been silent, I have not been unmindful of you...pray write me soon, for I long to hear from you—you may depend on my constant replies."⁴²⁰ An earlier letter—which Wheatley signs "I am most affectionately, my dear Obour, your sincere friend"⁴²¹—expresses similar sentiments, and hints that Phillis may have felt a need for the two women* to conduct their correspondence covertly. "You will do me a great favour if you'll write me by every opportunity," Wheatley tells Tanner, adding, "Direct your letters under cover to Mr. John Peters in Queen Street."⁴²² It is unclear why Phillis would make such a request, especially given that she had apparently felt no need to do so in preceding years, but it perhaps might be inferred that Wheatley's desire for secrecy may

⁴²⁰ Phillis Wheatley, William Lawrence Clements, Eliot Norton, Nathaniel Bradstreet Shurtleff, C. Deane, O. Tanner, John Wilson and Son, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley, the Negro-slave poet of Boston* (Boston: Privately printed, 1864): 19.

⁴²¹ Wheatley et. al, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley*, 19.

⁴²² Wheatley et. al, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley*, 19

have stemmed from the kind of private intimacies she anticipated in Obour's imminent response.

As Tara Bynum points out, "Tanner and Wheatley craft and speak—in this space of letters, language, and memory—an erotic out of which each woman feels, loves, and remembers on her own terms,"⁴²³ and yet this crafted space was subject to the conveyance (and perhaps surveillance) of those facilitating the pair's exchanges. Each of their letters "participate[d] in a series of hand-to-hand transactions (from Wheatley to Rev. Samuel Hopkins and his son, or 'a young man of [Tanner's] Acquaintance,' Mr. Pemberton, Mrs. Tanner, and presumably unnamed persons in between)" that likely limited the kinds of things the two could safely express in their notes to one another. By instructing Tanner to bypass this chain of transfer and instead direct her future letters, "under cover," to Peters, was Wheatley attempting to allow for less scrutinized, potentially queerer conversations to ensue?

In her piece "Phillis Wheatley on Friendship," Bynum explains that she "often wonder[s] what the poet Phillis Wheatley thought about as she brushed her teeth...[or] in the midst of her most mundane activities."⁴²⁴ Given that relatively little is known about Wheatley's day-to-day life, those attempting to parse the particulars of her existence are often left with similar questions. What *did* the poet think about while brushing her teeth? And more to the point, what did she think about in her private moments or when writing, "most affectionately," a letter to Obour? How much of her inner life was shaped by and

⁴²³ Bynum, "Phillis Wheatley on Friendship," 47.

⁴²⁴ Bynum, "Phillis Wheatley on Friendship," 42.

centered around her relationship with Tanner? Similarly, when Obour later offered her own thoughts about Wheatley's husband (the aforementioned John Peters) and opined that "poor Phillis let herself down by marrying"⁴²⁵ him, was her criticism rooted in benevolent concern or jealousy? Grappling with these questions "dares us to rethink what kinds of sociability [were] possible between black women in the revolutionary era"⁴²⁶ and imbue with queer possibility terms like 'friendship' that are often used to flatten and normalize the complex relationships between such women*.

Evaluation of the life of Rebecca Jackson prompts a similar rethinking. After the neighborhood revival that would come to shape the course of her life and religious practice, the future Shaker eldress wrote about how the revelation she received in 1831 (that she must seek a life of 'celibacy'), in effect, "destroyed the lust of [her] flesh, and made [her] to hate it... Of all things it seemed the most filthy in the sight of God, both in the married and unmarried, it all seemed alike."⁴²⁷ The strength of Jackson's language in describing her apparent rejection of sex, including and most notably that with her husband Samuel, is striking in its intensity. It is also striking in that it diverges starkly from the ways Jackson would later write about the intimate life she shared with her companion, Rebecca Perot (whom she likely met in Philadelphia the same year she and Samuel officially separated). This contrast, then, raises questions about the extent to which Jackson's vow of celibacy actually consisted of complete abstinence from the

⁴²⁵ Wheatley et. al, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley*, 6.

⁴²⁶ Bynum, "Phillis Wheatley on Friendship," 43.

⁴²⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 17.

erotic and that to which it was simply a renunciation of the impositions of heterosexuality, framed within the language available to Jackson in her given context.

This latter explanation is seemingly bolstered by Jackson's own equating of sex with "the works of generation—which [are] the Fall."⁴²⁸ Given that a sexual relationship between Jackson and Perot would not result in "generation" (i.e., procreation), it is entirely possible that she would have viewed such a relationship as existing outside of this categorization. As Kittredge Cherry puts it, life for Shakers like Jackson and Perot "was homosocial if not [also] homosexual. When they spoke of celibacy, did they mean abstinence from all sexual expression or just heterosexual intercourse and procreation?"⁴²⁹ She adds, "'Sodomy' was often defined as only sexual intercourse between men, as if sexual activity between women did not count. Perhaps celibacy was the same in the minds of some,"⁴³⁰ including Rebecca Jackson. If this was the case, then it is generative—if somewhat tricky—to consider how best to characterize and ultimately classify liaisons like the one between the two Rebeccas.

Scholars attempting to do just this sort of work have struggled with how to discuss Jackson and Perot's life together without imposing terms and identities they themselves never claimed. Alice Walker, for instance, takes issue with Jean Humez's assertion in *Gifts of Power* that, given Jackson's decision "after breaking with her husband" to "[live] and [travel] throughout the rest of her life in close relationship with a

⁴²⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 199.

⁴²⁹ Kittredge Cherry, "The Two Rebeccas: Queer Black Pair Founded Shaker Religious Community in 1800s," *Q Spirit*, May 24, 2020, <https://qspirit.net/two-rebeccas-queer-black-shaker/>.

⁴³⁰ Cherry, "The Two Rebeccas."

single cherished, intimate woman friend...perhaps, had she been born in the modern age, she would have been an open lesbian.”⁴³¹ Walker (as noted in the previous chapter) questions the efficacy of this appellation, and inquires “Even if Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot *were* erotically bound, what was their own word for it?...Did they see it as a rejection of men? Did it (whatever they did alone together) infringe on their notion of celibacy?”

Though these first two questions are not altogether answerable due to the limitations of the records currently available, it is perhaps possible to begin resolving the latter inquiry via “close readings of Jackson’s dreams and visions that involve Perot [which] reveal the ways in which erotic energies, so vociferously denied in her physical reality, are accounted for in the sensual and emotional imagery of [Jackson’s] psychic landscape.”⁴³²

In these “dreams and visions,” Perot exists for Jackson as “a figure of attachment, beauty, and deep affection.”⁴³³ In a journal entry dated March 27, 1851, Jackson recalls dreaming:

... that Rebecca and me lived together. The door opened west, and there was a river that came from the west and it ran eastward, passing our house on the south side and one part came front on the west—a beautiful white water. I stood in the west door looking westward on the beautiful river. I saw Rebecca Perot coming in the river, her face to the east, and she aplunging in the water every few steps, head foremost, abathing herself. She only had on her undergarment. She was pure and clean, even as the water in which she was abathing. She came facing me out of the

⁴³¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 9.

⁴³² Marlon Rachquel Moore, *In the Life and in the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014): 96.

⁴³³ Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 97.

water. I wondered she was not afraid. Sometimes she would be hid, for a moment, and then she would rise again. She looked like an Angel, oh, how bright!⁴³⁴

Given the obviously erotic nature of this dream, it is interesting that Jackson does not seem to regard this nighttime vision as “filthy”⁴³⁵ (a term she notably used earlier in the text to describe the prospect of sex within heterosexual marriage). Rather, her descriptions of Perot ‘abathing’ in clean white water, clothed only in her undergarments, “conveys a connection in Jackson’s imaginary among beauty, purity, and Perot’s nearly naked body.”⁴³⁶ Not only, then, does Jackson frame her sensual (and possibly sexual) attachment to her companion as apparently reconcilable with her religious practice and life of celibacy (broadly defined), but also even as perhaps spiritually filling—not just permissible, but indeed sanctioned. This is made evident in Jackson’s recollection of a June 1851 vision in which her ex-husband Samuel (now deceased) makes a reappearance, materializing as an ethereal presence in the house his former wife shared with Perot and giving Jackson “much comfort.”⁴³⁷

“After awhile,” she adds, “Rebecca Perot came in and sat down. [Samuel] went and stood by her left side, and blessed her, and gave her love, and she was blessed. She said that as soon as she came into the room, she knew that good spirits were in the room. And she was very thankful for so great a notice.”⁴³⁸ With this, Jackson envisions her ex-

⁴³⁴ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 225.

⁴³⁵ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 17.

⁴³⁶ Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 98.

⁴³⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 228.

⁴³⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 228.

husband—who in earlier days acted as the living embodiment of repression and constraint—as offering his approval of she and Perot’s relationship, a sort of second (and final) “release from bondage.”⁴³⁹

Further evidence of the ways Jackson seemingly viewed her connection to Perot as a part of, rather than apart from, her spirituality can be found in her February 1856 vision, experienced after she had “laid down to rest [and] was in sweet meditation.”⁴⁴⁰ At this time, “a beautiful vision passed before [Jackson’s] spirit eye. [She] saw a garden of excellent fruit. And it appeared to come near, even onto [her] bed, and around [her]! Yea, it covered [her]. And [she] was permitted to eat, and to give a portion to Rebecca Perot, and she ate, and was strengthened.”⁴⁴¹ As Marlon Moore points out, “fruit is a major motif” in Jackson’s dreams, and “dreams of fruit are commonly understood to symbolize erotic desire or emotional satisfaction.”⁴⁴² That this desire and satisfaction find expression in a vision that mirrors the story of Adam and Eve—reimagined here not as “the fall of man”⁴⁴³ but rather the fulfillment of woman*—is telling.

Rebecca Perot reports having similarly significant dreams, the contents of which she often dictated to Jackson, as she had never learned to write. In one such instance, dated April 16, 1847, Perot explains that she “dreamt that Ann Potter [an acquaintance] and Rebecca Jackson and myself were in England. And Ann Potter took us to the Queen,

⁴³⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 147.

⁴⁴⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 261.

⁴⁴¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 261.

⁴⁴² Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 97.

⁴⁴³ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 18.

and she crowned Rebecca King and me Queen of Africa. I then saw Africa with all her treasures of gold, together with all her inhabitants, and these was all given into our charge.”⁴⁴⁴ As in the case of her companion, Rebecca Jackson, the psychic realm of Perot’s unconscious visions offers her a space in which her relationship with Jackson is validated; the two exist in this dream as regal, exalted and—interestingly—married. The act of being crowned King and Queen of Africa and having the continent’s treasures, as well as its inhabitants, ‘given into [their] charge’ likely reflects both the Rebeccas’ desire to use their religious platform to increase outreach to other Black people, free and enslaved (a desire that would later cause the couple to break, temporarily, with the Shaker community they inhabited) as well as Perot’s understanding of the dynamics within her relationship.

Throughout the WPA narratives, there are similar instances of interviewees describing dreams as a means by which to communicate desire in a way that offered the opacity necessary to avoid stigma. South Carolinian Amy (Chavis) Perry’s recollections are especially emblematic. Born in the “country, near Orangeburg,”⁴⁴⁵ Perry was emancipated during childhood and claims to have very little memory of her early years. “Some ole people mek out like dey remembers a lot ob t’ings...[but] I ‘members berry little, berry little,” Perry admits. “I don’t ‘member much ‘bout what we did in de country befo’ de war, nor what we eat, no[r] no games and such. I don’t [even] know what de big

⁴⁴⁴ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 308.

⁴⁴⁵ Amy (Chavis) Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

people wear.”⁴⁴⁶ What she *does* remember is the medicine she was given in her youth (“castor oil...dogwood[,] and cherry bark”⁴⁴⁷ mixed with whiskey), the “dreadful times” she experienced “when de Yankee[s] come tru”⁴⁴⁸ appropriating rations, and— interestingly and in great detail—a dream she had just a few years after the War.

“I dream I was in a field,” Perry explains, “a large green field. A girl was dere dat I didn’t had no use for. I had a bundle on my back. I honey de girl up and love [her] and de bundle fall on de ground.”⁴⁴⁹ Perplexingly, this is positioned within the text as a conversion dream, but there is much that can be (queerly) read onto this brief adolescent vision of Perry ‘honeying up and loving’ another girl.

Dreams as expressions of desire are also central to the correspondence between two nineteenth century Black free women*, analyzed at length in Farrah Jasmine Griffin’s *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*. Primus—“the daughter of a prominent Black Hartford family [who] was one of many women...who traveled South after the Civil War to establish schools and teach the newly freed”⁴⁵⁰— appears to have spent some portion of her youth involved in an intense (and years-long)

⁴⁴⁶ Amy (Chavis) Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁴⁷ Amy (Chavis) Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁴⁸ Amy (Chavis) Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁴⁹ Amy (Chavis) Perry, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁵⁰ Farrah Jasmine Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868* (Ballantine Books, 2001): Location no. 192.

intimate relationship with her friend and confidante Addie Brown, who worked as a domestic laborer. In a letter written by the latter to the former on October 2, 1861, Brown describes how she had “dreampt of [Rebecca] last night,” adding “I thought I was setting on your lap with my head on your bosom [and] other things connected with it. I will not tell you at present. When I wake up in the night and found it was all a dream I was so disappointed.”⁴⁵¹ While this recollection isn’t especially explicit, it leaves very little room for misinterpretation. As Griffin notes, “though Addie [had] been forthright” in her preceding letters “about her emotional connection to Rebecca, her dream of ‘other things’ is one of the first hints” within the text “of the truly erotic nature of their relationship.”⁴⁵²

The following year, Brown writes to Primus to report having had yet another dream of her companion, recalling “My Dear I dreampt of you last night I don’t sleep good I am so cold I miss you very much and also you [sic] feather bed. I took a hot iron up to bed all overjump [sic] into. I kept little warm by that means I wish that we could sleep together this winter [instead] I would like it very much would you not [Rebecca][?]”⁴⁵³

In addition to desire, however, these dreams also served as expressions of jealousy, as evidenced by a letter Brown penned to Primus in January 1866. “I...dreampt of you two night[s],” she writes, “One night I was standing and seeing you caress another lady and not me how bad did I feel.”⁴⁵⁴ It is unknown what occurred in the second dream

⁴⁵¹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 925.

⁴⁵² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 925.

⁴⁵³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1361.

⁴⁵⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1979.

mentioned, as the next page of this particular letter is missing, but it is clear from this story that while the two women* regarded each other's male paramours with relative disinterest or even polite cordiality (not viewing these "secondary flirtations," Griffin speculates, as "threats to their relationship"),⁴⁵⁵ the prospect of Primus pursuing another woman—even if only in Addie's dreams—causes Brown no small amount of distress.

These themes, of outside lovers and romantic envy, show up in Rebecca Jackson's dreams as well, albeit in more somewhat cryptic ways. In an 1855 journal entry, Jackson casually mentions having lived with a woman* named Sally Ann during "an undocumented period in [her] life."⁴⁵⁶ This might have been either "between 1836, when she separated from Samuel Jackson, and 1840, when she became involved in the New York and Albany [religious] circles"⁴⁵⁷ with which she was connected, or "between 1843, when she became committed to the Shakers, and 1847, when she and Perot first went to Watervliet."⁴⁵⁸ While Jackson does not elaborate in her writings about the nature of she and Sally Ann's relationship, her recollection of an 1856 dream she has involving this woman with whom she once cohabitated may offer some clues:

I dreamt that Rebecca and me were together, and Sally Ann Parker came in. I got up, after speaking to Sally Ann, and went out of the room. I was gone a few minutes, and when I came in, I found that Sally Ann had combed all Rebecca's hair out. And her hair was black, sleek, and short. I put my hand upon it with great sorrow, and said, "Oh, you have combed all her hair out!" She made light of it. I said, "I would not have had it done for nothing! I have took so much pains, and had got it so long." "Long?" she said. "Yes, I had," I replied.

⁴⁵⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 717.

⁴⁵⁶ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁴⁵⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁴⁵⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

She then took a large bun of hair from somewhere. And holding it in her right hand, turning it over, "Long?" she said. "Yea," I said. And she began to pull it out in locks. "Why, I did not know it was so long."

All this time, Rebecca was making light of it. And when I looked again, the hair on her head had become gray and stubby and curly and hard. I put my hand on it. And oh, I did lament over it!⁴⁵⁹

In *Gifts of Power*, editor Jean Humez posits this dream as erotic—an interpretation which Alice Walker later questions. "Considering that our culture has always treasured long hair nearly as much as reading, and frequently *as* much, I submit that this does not qualify as an erotic dream," she writes. It is possible, however, that the eroticism (or lack thereof) present in this description is less relevant than what is being intimated here regarding the relationships between these three women*.

Given that Rebecca Jackson and Sally Ann lived together for some period of time, years before the recording of this dream (possibly during the period in which Rebecca was in community with Perot and the woman with whom Perot previously lived, Susan),⁴⁶⁰ it is probable that what this dream represents is an act of jealousy on the part of Parker. If, as Walker posits, lengthy hair has long been treasured as a symbol of beauty, it makes sense that the woman with whom Rebecca Jackson previously shared her life (and home) would, in this envisioned scenario, want to strip Perot of that very symbol, potentially displacing her as "a figure of attachment, beauty, and deep affection"⁴⁶¹ in Jackson's eyes. So, while this dream perhaps cannot necessarily be categorized as erotic,

⁴⁵⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 260.

⁴⁶⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 222.

⁴⁶¹ Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 97.

it does provide insight into Rebecca's feelings and anxieties regarding her intimate relationships.

Contending with (eighteenth and) nineteenth century Black women's* dreams and self-definitions (as 'celibate,' as desirous, as longing, and even as possessive and envious) allows for more expansive and nuanced investigations into how they conceived of their lives and interactions with other Black women*. Thus, while this chapter will at times work to examine the physical aspects of these relationships, the

concern is not to argue for a lesbian identity [based in] sex acts, per se, but rather to work from a critical perspective that provides a queer space of interpretive possibilities. Sexuality is not limited to genital contact and definitely does not begin with it. Sexuality involves attraction, fantasy, vibrational connection, and impulses that can occur before, during, after, or instead of physical contact.⁴⁶²

Such a lens makes it possible to grapple fully with the richness—and queer complication—characterizing the lives of individuals like Rebecca Jackson and Minty Gurry Caden.

“ME AND MISS BERTIE DOES REST RIGHT WELL TOGETHER:” SHARING SPACE, SHARING INTIMACY

The transcript of South Carolinian Charity Moore's WPA interview, perhaps unintentionally, offers some insight into the ways Black women*—who, as discussed in the previous chapter, often rejected marriage and normative existential trajectories—reimagined the domestic realm as a site for them to exist (sometimes solely) in the company of other Black women*. “One quarter of a mile north of Woodward station and

⁴⁶² Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 98.

one hundred yards east of U.S. #21,” the narrative begins, “is the beautiful residence of Mr. T.W. Brice. In the backyard is a two-room frame house. In this house lives Charity Moore and another aged Negro woman.”⁴⁶³ Apparently unwed (as she makes no mention of a husband and had retained at the time of her interview her maiden name), Moore and her unnamed companion “occup[ied] the house together and exist[ed] on the goodness and charity of Mr. Brice”⁴⁶⁴—who had been asked by Moore’s beloved father to “take care of Charity”⁴⁶⁵ after his death. Though the nature of Moore’s relationship with the ‘aged Negro woman’ with whom she was presumably living out her own final days is not explained, this description of the two’s occupation of the Brices’ backyard frame house “provides a queer space of interpretive possibilities.”⁴⁶⁶

The same is true of fellow South Carolinian Agnes James’ story, which includes a sixteen-year marriage punctuated by the death of her husband and the birth of seven children. Curiously, though each of her children grows up, marries, and moves away, James opts not to live with any of them (nor remarry) as she ages, as did countless other women* in this collection. Instead, James “stays over here with Miss Bertie,”⁴⁶⁷ a local

⁴⁶³ Charity Moore, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁶⁴ Charity Moore, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁶⁵ Charity Moore, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

⁴⁶⁶ Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 98.

⁴⁶⁷ Agnes James, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum*.

woman with whom she was acquainted. She provides few details of their relationship, but adds, “Yes’um, me and Miss Bertie does rest right well together, I say.”⁴⁶⁸

Phillis Wheatley’s relationship with Obour Tanner also opens up space for such queer interpretive possibilities, particularly when considering the potential origins of the two’s connection. Though there is little extant information remaining about Tanner—including, apparently, the exact details of how she came to know and form a bond with Wheatley—Charles Deane of the Massachusetts Historical Society has posited that “from some expressions in [Phillis and Obour’s] letter[s], it may be inferred that they were brought together from Africa, and perhaps at the same time.”⁴⁶⁹ Were the two women* shipmates? And if so, what sort of speculative capacities might that fact enable?

In her piece “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley considers “how queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the” colonies, including those between enslaved women* who “created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds.”⁴⁷⁰ In so doing, these women* “resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these ships.”⁴⁷¹ If Phillis Wheatley and Obour Tanner were, in fact, brought over from Senegambia together, it is possible that their relationship represented this same brand of resistance.

⁴⁶⁸ Agnes James, Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum.

⁴⁶⁹ Wheatley et. al, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley*, 7.

⁴⁷⁰ Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14 (2008): 192.

⁴⁷¹ Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” 192.

Reading their subsequent correspondence, then, “demands a reconsideration of the archive, what we expect to find inside it, and what terms we use to bear witness to the realities of black women—in particular, those who look[ed] for each other in...the words of the page”⁴⁷² or the hold of the ship. That is, the terms by which Wheatley and Tanner’s relationship is evaluated must be expanded to account for the type of attachment the two may have shared—one that exceeded friendship and was forged in the same bloody process by which people became property and women* became *mati*.⁴⁷³

Addie Brown’s letters to Rebecca Primus represent a more forthright glimpse into the kinds of intimacies available to Black women* sharing space with one another. In the fall of 1862, after months of separation, the pair were once again living in the same city (an arrangement that would prove to be a relative rarity throughout the course of their liaison). Thus, “the Hartford letters of this period” were more infrequent—given that Brown and Primus were able to connect in-person on a consistent basis and had less need for written correspondence—and served primarily as “notes between visits [that] give us a sense of the interaction between Rebecca and Addie when they [were] together.”⁴⁷⁴ In one such note, dated September 11, 1862, Brown seems to indicate that she and Rebecca had recently slept together, writing, “although I felt sad [the other] morning I aw[o]ke before you I impress several kisses upon your lips and gave you a fond embrace.”⁴⁷⁵ This

⁴⁷² Bynum, “Phillis Wheatley on Friendship,” 43.

⁴⁷³ *Mati* is defined by Tinsley as a term of endearment meaning “she who survived the Middle Passage with me.” See *Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic*, cited above.

⁴⁷⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1268.

⁴⁷⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1268.

recollection underscores the tenderness and familiarity characterizing the two's relationship, with Addie reflecting fondly on waking up beside Rebecca (either at the latter's residence or her own) and showering her with kisses.

In a January 1864 follow-up letter, which “contains one of the most explicit passages concerning the nature of the physical relationship between the two women,”⁴⁷⁶ Brown admits that “while sitting on [Primus'] lap [she] had a very thrilling sensation pass through [her] today” before asking “Did the same occur to you[?]”⁴⁷⁷ These ‘thrilling sensations,’ along with Brown's professed affection for Primus made it difficult for her to fathom being deprived of either in the times when the two of them were apart, as is reflected by her frequent confession that she is “sorry that [she] can't have [Rebecca] to sleep with”⁴⁷⁸ on nights they are separated or how she “hope[s] it won't be long before [she] be able to lay in [Rebecca's] arms.”⁴⁷⁹

Interestingly, as in the case of Minty Gurry Caden decades earlier, the people closest to Addie and Rebecca seemed to be aware of and at times even supportive of the couple's relationship. In fact, Brown tells Rebecca at one point that the former's friend Bell “said I thought as much of you [Primus] if you was a gentleman she also said if either one of us was a gent we would marry.”⁴⁸⁰ In the late 1850s, during a period in which the two were living in separate cities but in close enough proximity to make

⁴⁷⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1372.

⁴⁷⁷ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1389.

⁴⁷⁸ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1398.

⁴⁷⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1339.

⁴⁸⁰ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1965.

occasional visits to one another, it is clear from Brown's letters that "the community surrounding the two young women [knew] that they [were] very close and provide[d] them sympathy when they [were] apart."⁴⁸¹ This sympathy was somewhat limited however, as upon Primus' later relocation to Maryland in order to teach the recently emancipated, "Rebecca's family and friends, [though] recogniz[ing] the closeness of the relationship between the two women... seem[ed] to treat Addie's emotional response to [this] departure as a girlhood crush."⁴⁸²

On November 8, 1865, Brown writes to Rebecca, "How I have miss you I have lost all no more pleasure for me now[.] Aunt Emily ask me last eve if I was going to carry that sober face until you return[.] She also said if Mr. Tines was to see me [he would] think that I care more for you then [sic] I did for him."⁴⁸³ Clearly, then, while Addie feels comfortable enough to express her despair at her companion's absence, 'carrying a sober face' and adopting a sullen affect, she is still met with stern warnings that her evident attachment to Primus will drive off men like Mr. Tines, who was attempting to pursue her. Brown resists such urges to downplay her feelings, however, telling Aunt Emily "I [do] love [Rebecca] more then [sic] I ever would [Mr. Tines]," to which Emily responds "[you] better not tell him so"⁴⁸⁴ (a piece of advice that Addie entirely ignores). Such proclamations demonstrate that even as those around her attempted to minimize and make light of their connection, Brown insisted on marking she and Primus' relationship

⁴⁸¹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 446.

⁴⁸² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1504.

⁴⁸³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1520.

⁴⁸⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1520.

as more than a ‘girlhood crush’ or passing phase, something lasting and important that she was unwilling to diminish, even and perhaps especially for the sake of protecting the egos of individuals like Mr. Tines.

In spite of this, the separations between Addie and Rebecca would come to grow more and more extended (and finally permanent) as the two moved along the East Coast, often in search of work. Both would eventually marry and settle down in separate cities, no longer able to share space or sustain former intimacies.

Rebecca Jackson’s life, on the other hand, followed an almost directly inverse path, as her increased mobility following her 1830 spiritual conversion and subsequent rebuffing of heterosexual marriage brought her access to a queerer, more subversive existence. Central to this series of liberatory transitions was Jackson’s unique religious doctrine, developed first as an itinerant preacher unaffiliated with any particular church and later as a Shaker eldress. This doctrine consisted of (and perhaps stemmed from) a denunciation of traditional familial structures and the social mores inherent to them. In fact, Jackson’s formal entrance into public life all but necessitated a moving away from the patriarchal impositions of the men in her circle, including her husband Samuel. As a fellow Shaker explains, in an 1823 sect document that in many ways seems to mirror Jackson’s own views:

[in marriage] the woman is not only subjected to the pains and sorrows of childbirth, but even in her conception she becomes subject to the libidinous passions of her husband. This slavish subjection is often carried to such a shocking extent, that many females have suffered an unnatural and premature death, in consequence of the unseasonable and excessive indulgence of this passion in man...[And] whether her subjection be willing or unwilling, still this

does not alter its servile nature, as respects the man's power of enforcing it, so long as he possesses that power, as her husband.⁴⁸⁵

By rejecting what it can be supposed Rebecca would have seen as a “slavish subjection” to the man she married—based on her categorization of that marriage as a form of “bondage”—(notably childless) Jackson was able to secure for herself a broader range of options.

In this way, being “freed of sexual desire for her husband” (assuming there was any to begin with) acted as a sort of “bonus gift”—along with those of discernment, foresight, and healing—which “in one sanctified swoop, [made] her dependence on and obligation to...men [vanish]. So empowered, she then took her message to the wider community and ‘testified against the churches’ for they were, in doctrine and custom, insisting on her submission to male leadership at home, inside the walls of their institutions, and in her religious conduct outside of formal church services—all of which she refused to do.”⁴⁸⁶ This, of course, expedited Jackson’s alienation from the Philadelphia A.M.E. community to which she was connected, culminating in her (ultimately denied) request for a heresy trial. Following this turn of events, which represented something of a terminus (and a catalyst), Rebecca embarked on a journey away from Philadelphia and toward both Watervliet and a life with Rebecca Perot.

The first several years of this journey are lost to history, as Jackson recorded very little about them in her writings. By 1840, however, she was still traveling frequently and

⁴⁸⁵ Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women’s Writing* (Princeton University Press, 1999): 113.

⁴⁸⁶ Moore, *In The Life and In the Spirit*, 93.

was associated with a group of Perfectionists called the “Little Band,” organized in 1837 by Allen Pierce, a man who was purported to be “gifted in seeing spirits.”⁴⁸⁷ Seen as possessing significant spiritual gifts herself, Jackson quickly became a leader within this small assemblage, though internal disputes (possibly over the issue of celibacy) soon caused rifts to form among them. In the winter of 1842-1843, several members of the “Little Band,” Rebecca included, paid a visit to the New York Shaker community where she would eventually come to live; Jackson would later write about this event as a life-changing experience, one in which “the power of God came upon [her] like the waves of the sea, and caused [her] to move back and forth under the mighty waters.”⁴⁸⁸ She adds, “It was as much as I could do to keep my seat.... They all [the Shakers] seemed to look as if they were looking into the spiritual world ... as if they were living to live forever.”⁴⁸⁹ Her trusted, divine inner voice confirmed to her that “these [were her] people,”⁴⁹⁰ and Rebecca committed to the Shakers shortly after (though she would not take up residence with them for several more years).

There are many features of Shakerism that may have enticed Jackson to gravitate toward this sect, including its emphasis on the “decorum, uniformity of dress, plainness, [and] cleanliness”⁴⁹¹ that she considered necessary for true spiritual rectitude. Chief among these features, though, may have been the Shakers’ commitment to celibacy—

⁴⁸⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 24.

⁴⁸⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 26.

⁴⁸⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 26.

⁴⁹⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 26.

⁴⁹¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 25.

which according to the Methodist clergy from whom Jackson had been forced to essentially flee—“threatened the ideology of the family, gender roles, and heterosexual relations, all considered ‘natural’ by nineteenth-century standards.”⁴⁹² Having already accepted that her personally held and publicly espoused religious beliefs posed many of these same sorts of threats, Rebecca was likely attracted to the notion of “celibacy in the Shaker sense, [which] was not based on the medieval male fear of ‘contamination’ by women, nor were the sect’s celibate women forced into a paradigm of ‘chastity’ as a prerequisite of ‘true womanhood.’ Rather, it constituted an ‘ascetic feminism.”⁴⁹³

This brand of ascetic feminism, rooted in “the Shaker belief in celibacy and gender equality[,] must have made [it] a magnet for sexual minorities. [Shakers] lived in communal dwellings with members of the same sex, sharing all property in common.”⁴⁹⁴ Thus, while her conversion required Jackson to relinquish her material possessions and submit to Shaker leadership in a way she had refused to do for her husband years earlier, it also provided a means by which to co-exist with her chosen companion in homosocial space, unencumbered by the expectations of heterosexual marriage or biological motherhood. Perhaps even more appealing was the fact that when Jackson and Perot relocated to Watervliet in 1847, their relationship was both acknowledged and honored. “In almost all of the references in Shaker records,” Humez explains, “[the two] are

⁴⁹² Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 113.

⁴⁹³ Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 113.

⁴⁹⁴ Cherry, “The Two Rebeccas.”

mentioned as a pair, called ‘the two Rebeccas.’ This suggests that they continued to live together during these years, perhaps sleeping in the same room.”⁴⁹⁵

Jackson’s life among the Shakers, however, was not without conflict. Almost immediately upon her arrival in Watervliet, Rebecca began to take issue with what she considered the needless insularity and self-concern of those around her, writing “After I ...saw how Believers seemed to be gathered to themselves, in praying for themselves and not for the world, which lay in midnight darkness, I wondered how the world was to be saved, if Shakers were the only people of God on the earth, and they seemed busy in their own concerns, which were mostly temporal.”⁴⁹⁶ In time, this criticism intensified and grew to encompass Jackson’s dissatisfaction with the Shakers’ outreach to Black people as the country moved toward war. Feeling called to initiate a mission trip to Philadelphia, Rebecca appealed to church leadership for funds (and permission) to organize such an effort, yet she was denied. This was possibly due to Shaker policy, which discouraged and, in many cases, disallowed members to mingle with non-members for fear of spiritual corruption, but Jackson seemed to blame this reticence almost entirely on Eldress Paulina Bates, director of the New York South Family of which the two Rebeccas were a part.

Frustrated by this lack of support, Jackson and Perot set out for Pennsylvania without the church’s blessing, an act which their fellow Shakers seemed to view as impudent. In a letter dated July 12, 1851, one member wrote, “Rebecca Jackson and the other colored woman that came with her, have started out, in their own gift, some time

⁴⁹⁵ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 28.

⁴⁹⁶ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 28.

last week, on a mission to convert her nation, or under that pretence, perhaps consciously, but I should say, rather delusively.”⁴⁹⁷ No longer shielded within the queer haven they had created for themselves in Watervliet, Jackson and Perot were still able to secure private space to share with one another, although this process became somewhat fraught.

“In 1852 I was at home in Philadelphia,” Rebecca explains, “It had been made known to me that I had a further work to do for my people, which compelled me to return. And I returned destitute.”⁴⁹⁸ Given the amount of labor she was compelled to do in order to help sustain the commune before her unsanctioned departure, Jackson’s talk of poverty likely indicated that “she might...have felt resentful at returning [to Pennsylvania] destitute,”⁴⁹⁹ even though she was made aware upon conversion that her property would not be returned to her should she later opt to leave the community.

This period of uncertainty would eventually come to an end when, after years of relative isolation, Jackson returned to Watervliet to resolve her differences with Eldress Bates. Following this reconciliation, Rebecca was (finally) given permission to officially start her own community in Philadelphia, which “combined Shaker theology with Black female praying band traditions” and consisted of “about a dozen to [twenty] members, mostly Black and female.”⁵⁰⁰ At long last, after years of battling with murderous husbands, contemptuous contemporaries, and obstructionist mentors, Rebecca Jackson—with Perot by her side—was able to create a family of her choosing, one that enabled her

⁴⁹⁷ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 32.

⁴⁹⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 238.

⁴⁹⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 238.

⁵⁰⁰ Cherry, “The Two Rebeccas.”

to live exactly as she wished: guided by her own inner voice and in community with Black women*.

In this, her experience parallels that of other such individuals of her time, who— with mixed success and amid an unending slew of societal barriers—found ways to push against the heteronormative, to occupy two-room frame houses and darkened bedrooms with friends and confidantes, setting the parameters of their own realities even as the forces-that-be worked to cast their relationships as girlhood crushes, or heresy. And though, as in the case of Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, not all of these women were able live out their days in each other’s company, for at least a few, stolen moments, they were permitted an opportunity to “rest right well together.”⁵⁰¹

“THEY WAS THE MOST PLEASURE TO EACH OTHER:” ON RE-IMAGINING MARRIAGE

Born in “Bow-and-arrow, Arkansas” after the War, Forrest City resident Dora Jerman’s WPA interview centers primarily around the pre-Emancipation experiences of her maternal grandmother, who stayed with Jerman’s family toward the end of her life. Though Jerman mentions her mother having married a “Pete Williams from Tennessee,” she provides no such biographical information on her grandmother; in fact, no mention is made at any point in the narrative of a grandfather figure. Instead, Jerman speaks at length about her grandmother’s relationship with a close, life-long friend named Polly, using as an entry point to this discussion the topic of the two women’s* quilting.

⁵⁰¹ Agnes James, Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3, Jackson-Quattlebaum.

“Grandma lived with us till she died,” Jerman explains, adding, “She used to have us sit around handy to thread her needles. She was a great hand to piece quilts. Her and Aunt Polly both. Aunt Polly was a friend that was sold with her every time. They was...the most pleasure to each other in old age.”⁵⁰² While Jerman’s language is couched in the rhetoric of platonic intimacy, her insistence on emphasizing Polly’s literal and emotional proximity to her grandmother—underscored both by the somewhat peculiar matter of the two women having always been sold as a pair as well as the fact that there is no mention of either woman ever being married—hints at a different kind of connection.

“They come on a boat from Virginia to Aberdeen, Mississippi,” Jerman continues, “She and Aunt Polly was sold several times and together till freedom.”⁵⁰³ Dora recalls her grandmother’s descriptions of the often arduous treks between sales, detailing how “when they got off the boat they had to walk a right smart ways and grandma’s feet cracked open and bled;”⁵⁰⁴ she adds, “Grandma said she had a hard time all her life. She was my mother’s mother and she lived to be way over a hundred years old...Grandma died first. Then Aunt Polly grieved so. She was old, old when she died. They still lived close together, mostly together. Aunt Polly lessened her days grieving for [Jerman’s grandmother].”⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰² Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

⁵⁰³ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

⁵⁰⁴ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

⁵⁰⁵ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

Once again, the intensity of the two women's* relationship is being emphasized here, this time via the invocation of an old, familiar trope whereby an individual (in this case, Polly) essentially dies of a broken heart after the passing of a loved one—a narrative arc generally reserved throughout the collection for (straight) widowed lovers.⁵⁰⁶ That Polly, who spent most if not all of her life living “close together, mostly together” with Jerman's grandmother “lessened her days grieving” her death provides some insight into the strength of their attachment.

What is most striking about Jerman's interview, however, is a passage that—without context—reads as relatively innocuous, but when placed in conversation with the stories of other (formerly) enslaved and free eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women*, complicates and ultimately broadens the ways relationships between such individuals might be conceived. “[Polly and Jerman's grandmother] called each other ‘sis’” Jerman tells WPA worker Irene Robertson, adding, “Grandma said, ‘I love sis so good.’”⁵⁰⁷ While on the surface this may seem like nothing more than the indicia of a close friendship (bordering on kinship) between two women* bonded for life by the shared memory of a mutual trauma, Alletha Smith's 1828 deposition concerning the case of Minty Gurry Caden offers an alternate, queerer frame by which to interpret this designation.

⁵⁰⁶ Clarissa Scales, *WPA Slave Narratives Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

⁵⁰⁷ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

In her testimony, Smith not only mentions that Minty “formed an intimacy with a negro woman”⁵⁰⁸ named Philis after she and her husband Joe Gurry, “fell out and parted,”⁵⁰⁹ she seems to indicate that the two women* cemented their union with a religious ceremony that can be understood as, essentially, a wedding. Minty and Philis “both joined the Methodice [sic] Church,” Smith explains, “*claimed a sisterhood*, and then [Minty] adopted that name as Minty Caden.”⁵¹⁰ Given the circumstances characterizing the lives of individuals like Minty and her partner, this turn of events is nothing short of remarkable. In a time where marriages between the enslaved were often informal, not ordained by the local clergy, and consisted of—at most—an enslaver’s consent to wed and a small party, the fact that these two Black women* (both enslaved during the period in which they would have been claiming this ‘sisterhood’) appear to have been joined in something akin to matrimony, in a church, is both anomalous and notable. It also reflects the ways nineteenth century Black women*, including enslaved individuals like Minty and Philis, “define[d] marriage as it was understood during and after slavery to encompass committed conjugal relationships, whether legal or not, monogamous, bigamous, polygamous, or serial” given that “Black...intimacy comprised a wide range of domestic arrangements out of necessity.”⁵¹¹ The ‘Sisterhood’ the two

⁵⁰⁸ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁵⁰⁹ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁵¹⁰ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁵¹¹ Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 7.

women entered into, then—which borrowed from the Methodist tradition of addressing spiritual allies as sister and brother, irrespective of blood relation⁵¹²—was both a symbolic and a public claim to validity.

This (re)definition of the institution sheds new light on stories like that of Dora Jerman’s grandmother and her companion, Polly. What might be read onto the duration and depth of their relationship given that they, like their contemporaries The Cadens, also called one another ‘sister’? It is perhaps especially telling that throughout her narrative, Jerman discusses the two as if they were a couple, even seeming to view the both of them as a co-parenting team of surrogate mothers.

“Aunt Polly was real black; mama was lighter. I called grandma ‘mama’ a right smart too,”⁵¹³ Dora explains. Later, she delineates the ways ‘mama’ and Polly would impart wisdom to the former’s grandchildren. “They was both field hands,” she begins, “[And] they would tell us girls about how they lived when they was girls. We’d cry. We lived in the country and we listened to what they said to us.”⁵¹⁴ This sharing of domestic space and responsibility, which seems to have been a constant in the two women’s* relationship, reflects the ways that—according to Tera Hunter—“relations between husbands and wives” (or in this case Polly and ‘Sis’) “had to be nimble...Survival

⁵¹² Vanessa M. Holden, “Living Free: Self-Emancipated Women and Queer Formations of Freedom,” *The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories*, edited by Janell Hobson (London, England: Routledge, 2021): 173.

⁵¹³ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

⁵¹⁴ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

dictated that African Americans had to endow gender values and ideals with their own particular inflections.”⁵¹⁵

These inflections are also present in the letters written by Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, many of which either open or close with the salutation “Dear Sister.”⁵¹⁶ Bynum notes that “With every greeting, Wheatley accesse[d] and [wrote] of a ‘pleasure deep down’...or what Audre Lorde describes more fully as the ‘erotic’:...[a] ‘sharing [of] deep feeling’ with another.”⁵¹⁷ What is clear from the life histories of women like Phillis, Minty, and Polly, then, is that such pleasure manifested in diverse ways, and could look like the adopting of another woman’s* name or ‘piecing quilts’ with a life-long confidante. In order to meaningfully interrogate what “loving [Polly] so good”⁵¹⁸ may have meant for Jerman’s grandmother, it is necessary to first consider how accounts like the one Jerman provides offer illuminative insight into the means by which such women* were plausibly able to secure for themselves “the most pleasure”⁵¹⁹ possible within the rigid strictures of their social environment. Often, this was done by tacitly (or in the case of Minty Gurry Caden, publicly) forgoing the often-coerced compulsory heterosexuality of the antebellum and post-bellum United States.

⁵¹⁵ Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 14.

⁵¹⁶ Wheatley et. al, *Letters of Phillis Wheatley*.

⁵¹⁷ Bynum, “Phillis Wheatley on Friendship,” 44.

⁵¹⁸ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

⁵¹⁹ Dora Jerman, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, Jackson-Lynch*.

The letters exchanged between Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus appear to indicate that free women* in the pre-Emancipation years were using similar language to make sense of their experiences. In March of 1862, Brown sent Primus a note that contained both an account of her employer's unwillingness to compensate her for her labor as well as a "response to Rebecca's request that Addie call her sister,"⁵²⁰ which proves revealing.

"You ask a favor and that is to call you my sister," Brown reminds Primus, "And then you ask me if it will be agreeable O my Darling Darling you know it would[!]"⁵²¹ Addie's excitement at the prospect of being asked to call Rebecca her 'sister' signals that she places some special significance on the term as it would have been used in this context—an endearment between intimate friends. She continues, "It has been my wish for sometime [but] I dare not ask my dear."⁵²² Though the two would not end up, as Minty Gurry Caden did, formalizing their 'sisterhood' in a place of worship or taking each other's names, Addie appears to regard Rebecca's request as a kind of proposal, one for which she longed but 'dared not ask.'

Later in this same missive, Brown continues to express her elation at this new development, writing, "I cannot find words to express my feelings towards you is all I can say [and] I will address you as such [sister]."⁵²³ True to her word, Brown proceeds to do just that for the duration of the text, transitioning almost immediately from salutations

⁵²⁰ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1238.

⁵²¹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1252.

⁵²² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1252.

⁵²³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1252.

like “My Own Darling & Beloved Rebecca”⁵²⁴ or “My Ever Dear & Darling Friend”⁵²⁵ to ones like “My Own Truly Loved Sister.”⁵²⁶ This shift demonstrates the means by which nineteenth century Black women* “managed to create deep and meaningful relationships” rooted less in appeals to legal validity than “a mutual exchange of affections and services, a chosen emotional and social bond.”⁵²⁷

This was certainly true in the case of Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot, who do not seem to have claimed any sisterhood officially ordained by either the Methodist or Shaker establishments, but did privately sanction their union in a way that tied in with their shared spirituality. In the winter of 1855, Jackson recounts feeling called to relate to Perot the details of “a gift that [she] had when Sally Ann lived with [her].”⁵²⁸ The nature of this ‘gift’ is not made entirely clear, but Jackson recalls that during her time with Sally Ann, “when she was faithful she had power over all her propensities, and she grewed in grace. And when she was unfaithful, they would gain power over her. And I had forgot it. And last night, after I laid down, it was brought to my mind. And oh, how thankful I do feel for it!”⁵²⁹ After being reminded of this experience, Jackson shares it with Rebecca and writes that “[Perot then] united with me in the covenant.”⁵³⁰ This ‘covenant,’ though

⁵²⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1240.

⁵²⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1140.

⁵²⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1285.

⁵²⁷ Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 8.

⁵²⁸ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁵²⁹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁵³⁰ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

clearly a form of religious ritual, also parallels many of the tenets of marriage, including faithfulness and commitment.

Jackson is instructed by her inner voice to:

Let Rebecca first confess to you all she has said, done, or thought. And then you can tell her all that you have said, or done, or thought. And how you resisted the wrong, and did the right. And this will give you both power over all sin. And you will both grow in grace and in wisdom and in understanding and in the knowledge of the will of God, and be prepared for a greater work which is at hand. *And thou shall withhold nothing from her*—only the correspondence that thou has with others, and that which they feel to open to thee in their times of trouble, for the release of their burdened mind and heavy-laden soul. This thou shall not tell—only to me. And I will give thee words of counsel and comfort to all such souls as may feel drawn to thee from time to time. Yea, I will be a counselor to them in thee, as long as thou shall keep this covenant which I gave thee for thy safe going [emphasis mine].⁵³¹

Jackson interprets this internal instruction as a form of divine approbation, securing the ability to lead and counsel others provided that she honors the pledge she makes to her companion Perot, “withhold[ing] nothing from her,”⁵³² till death did they part.

Thus, whether they called them sisterhoods, covenants, something else entirely, or nothing at all, the commitments enslaved, formerly enslaved, and free eighteenth and nineteenth century Black women* made to one another were emblematic of the ways “Black families...were nothing if not practical, adaptive, and creative in...meet[ing] the needs of emotional and material sustenance from birth to death.”⁵³³ These individuals—in

⁵³¹ Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁵³² Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 252.

⁵³³ Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 18.

open defiance of the heteronormative strictures imposed on them by the larger society—shared with each other their secrets, their memories, their intimate spaces, and sometimes even their lives.

CONCLUSION

Minty staged her escape from Susannah Rawlings' property in July of 1814 accompanied not only by Alexander Covington and Peter Rawlings, but also a fellow enslaved woman* named Mary Mitchel and her two daughters, Sidney and Harriet. Though Minty and Mary were not enslaved by the same mistress, seeing as Susannah's granddaughter Juliet (Mary's enslaver) was living with her during this period, it is likely that the two had been working in close proximity to one another for some time. Mary's husband, William, had already successfully "eloped from his mistress,"⁵³⁴ the daughter of Calvert County planter John Dare and "fled to a British ship on the Patuxent River."⁵³⁵ The couple was soon reunited, and eventually the entire family of four "settled at Preston, the largest settlement of Black refugees in Nova Scotia. By 1816, William had built a hut on half an acre of land that he had cleared [there]."⁵³⁶ However, there is no clarity on whether Minty—who also relocated to Nova Scotia—was to meet a similarly auspicious fate, as "it is unknown if Philis Caden went on to join"⁵³⁷ her companion up North. After

⁵³⁴ Claim of Susannah and Juliet Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files, Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁵³⁵ "William Mitchel," Maryland State Archives, Accessed November 19, 2020, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/050600/050636/html/050636bio.html>.

⁵³⁶ "Mary Mitchel," Maryland State Archives, Accessed November 19, 2020, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/050600/050625/html/050625bio.html>.

⁵³⁷ Veronica Lathroum, "Profiles: Chesapeake People in the War of 1812," *The Chesapeake Log*, Fall 2013, 13.

flouting every existing convention regarding nineteenth century marriage and intimacy, were Minty and Philis separated in the end by captivity and distance? Or were the two Black women*, against all odds, ultimately able to build a life together?

In the case of Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, the answer to this question is a resounding no. Despite years of passionate, personal correspondence between the two in which Brown vowed that “I live in hopes that we will be together [and] nothing will separate us but death,”⁵³⁸ Addie eventually married her long-time suitor Mr. Tines, largely in order to “escape from life as a domestic servant.”⁵³⁹ Any chance that the ‘sisters’ and intimate friends might reconnect in later life was soon dashed, as on the back of an envelope found among Primus’ papers is written, “in Rebecca’s handwriting . . . : ‘Addie died at home, January 11, 1870.’”⁵⁴⁰ She was just twenty-eight years old.

Rebecca Jackson’s final years, however, demonstrate that such was not the only possible end awaiting Black women* who loved other Black women*. After returning home to Philadelphia for the final time to start her own Shaker family, Jackson lived out her days doing what she had been seeking to do since her initial conversion in 1830: help the people around her in her own way and on her own terms. Together, she and Rebecca Perot led their community of fellow Believers up until the time of Jackson’s death in 1871. Shortly after, Perot christened herself “Mother Rebecca Jackson”—a decision that is generally interpreted as a sort of taking on of her mentor’s identity,⁵⁴¹ but can perhaps

⁵³⁸ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 1394.

⁵³⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 4419.

⁵⁴⁰ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, Location no. 5711.

⁵⁴¹ Cherry, “The Two Rebeccas.”

also be read (seeing as the two already shared a forename) as the younger Rebecca adopting her partner's last name, like Minty had done so many years before. And in so doing, Perot (now Jackson) was marking her relationship—even at the moment of its dissolution—as legitimate, thus sealing the covenant the two Rebeccas had entered into in earlier days.

It may have been a similar impulse that compelled Minty to retain her companion's surname after arriving in Nova Scotia, whether she was ever joined by Philis or not. In truth, it may never be known whether the two women* ended up together or—as with so many other individuals like them—were kept apart by forces outside of their control. What *is* known is that on the Halifax List, “which recorded Black immigrants arriving between 1815 and 1818,”⁵⁴² the formerly enslaved escapee, still connected in sentiment if not in person to the individual with whom she had previously “claimed a sisterhood,”⁵⁴³ listed herself in one of the final concrete documentations of her existence as “Menty Caden.”⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴² “Minty Caden,” Maryland State Archives, Accessed November 19, 2020, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/002500/002509/html/002509bio.html>.

⁵⁴³ Claim of Susannah Rawlings, Calvert County, Case No. 569, Case Files. Ca. 1814-28, entry 190, Record Group 76, National Archives, College Park.

⁵⁴⁴ “Minty Caden,” Maryland State Archives, Accessed November 19, 2020, <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5400/sc5496/002500/002509/html/002509bio.html>.

Chapter Five: “I Remain Always Your Affectionate Friend:” Power, Proximity, and Pleasure In Interactions Between Black and White Women*

In March of 1885, the nuns of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Toledo, Ohio received a telegram that Mother Mary Amadeus, their former mother superior, was suffering from a severe case of pneumonia and appeared to be on the brink of death. Upon receipt of this message, a convoy was immediately dispatched to the Montana Territory, where Mother Amadeus and a small contingent of fellow nuns had relocated one year prior in hopes of providing aid (and religious conversion) to young indigenous girls who might otherwise be subject to settler violence on the frontier. Though the six women had managed to establish a fledgling ‘Indian School’ in what their leader had described in an 1884 Christmas letter as “the snowy mountains of ice-bound savage land”⁵⁴⁵ (which can perhaps be read as an indication of her sentiments toward the native population she was seeking to instruct), their accommodations had been limited to first a covered wagon in which the nuns had slept for months and then a single-room log cabin built by wandering miners. Having endured blizzards, frostbite, and exposure, the Montana assemblage was now requesting aid as their director lay dying.⁵⁴⁶

Among those deployed on the hastily prepared rescue mission was fifty-three-year-old Mary Fields, who—though not a nun—had been employed as a groundskeeper

⁵⁴⁵ Miantae Metcalf McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, on the Stage, Behind the Badge*, edited by Bruce A. Glasrud, Michael N. Searles, and Albert S. Broussard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016): 150.

⁵⁴⁶ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom.”

with the Convent of the Sacred Heart for some time.⁵⁴⁷ Formerly enslaved by Mother Amadeus' older brother, Judge Edmund Dunn,⁵⁴⁸ Fields had been intimately acquainted with Amadeus for much of her life. The events she experienced after making the decision to follow her companion to Montana would end up becoming the stuff of legend—fodder for countless children's books and even a Hallmark Channel film. Indeed, it was on this March night as she boarded the night train in Toledo and set out for an unfamiliar territory that Fields began the transition from Mary Fields to the enigmatic Stagecoach Mary, a near-mythic invention (largely of others' creation).

This invention, as discussed in this work's second chapter, often hinges on harrowing tales of daring escapes, heroic battles with both wolves and men, and unwavering fealty to the nuns with whom she made her home for years. And yet, though scholars have routinely positioned Fields as a gender transgressor, with one even describing her as “the antithesis of the nineteenth-century Victorian image of womanhood,”⁵⁴⁹ these delineations have—interestingly and perhaps tellingly—rarely allowed space to consider the possibility of Mary Fields' queerness.⁵⁵⁰ If, as biographer Miantae Metcalf McConnell posits, “it was an act of love that compelled Mary Fields...[to] travel over fifteen hundred snow-laden miles to help her friend”⁵⁵¹ and long-time companion Mother Amadeus, then it is worth speculating on what kind of ‘love’

⁵⁴⁷ McConnell, “Mary Fields' Road to Freedom.”

⁵⁴⁸ Herb Boyd, “The Intrepid Mary Fields,” *New York Amsterdam News* (1962).

⁵⁴⁹ Kelli Cardenas Walsh, “Fields, Stagecoach Mary” (Oxford University Press, 2005): 1.

⁵⁵⁰ Notable exceptions include Matt Richardson's “No More Secrets, No More Lies,” cited in Chapter Two.

⁵⁵¹ McConnell, “Mary Fields' Road to Freedom,” 149.

such an act involved, and how that love—which was, in truth, not even possible within the context of enslavement—was inextricably bound to and shaped by the power differentials and societal constraints characterizing the two’s relationship.

Such speculation allows also for an investigation into the interactions between other Black and white nineteenth century women*, who forged similar interracial connections both prior to and proceeding the War—connections that consisted of sustained intimacy and stunning cruelty, unmitigated power and subversive pleasure. Grappling with the totality of these liaisons requires a queer reexamination that neither elides nor romanticizes the often-tenuous bonds between Black women* and their mistresses or post-Emancipation employers.

THE POWER-LADEN PROBLEMATIC OF PRIVILEGE AND PLEASURE

In her groundbreaking work *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, Stephanie Jones-Rogers opens by debunking an assertion made by *New York Tribune* editor James Redpath in 1859 (and echoed by countless scholars in the years since), that Southern white women remained complicit in the maintenance of chattel slavery—rather than agitating for Emancipation—largely because they were “reared under the shadow of the peculiar institution” and “shielded...from [its] horrific realities.”⁵⁵² He added that since such women “never attend[ed] auctions, never witness[ed] ‘examinations,’ [and] seldom, if ever, [saw] the negroes lashed,” they

⁵⁵² Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020): ix.

managed to avoid the “most obnoxious features”⁵⁵³ of enslavement and thus possessed no compelling reasons to shift toward abolitionist sentiment. Jones-Rogers points out, however, that this claim reflects a common, though wholly unfounded, misapprehension as to white women’s role in the treatment and ongoing exploitation of the enslaved. She offers as a rejoinder to Redpath’s image of innocence the story of Martha Gibbs, a slaveholding Irishwoman who, after being forced to emancipate the people she enslaved following the surrender of the Confederate Army, marched many of these same individuals at gunpoint to Harrison County, Texas in 1865 and made them farm for an entire additional year before finally liberating them.⁵⁵⁴

Across archives, similar narratives emerge of planter women’s knowledge of *and* active (at times even gleeful) participation in the forms of management and control by which millions were violently enslaved. In an edited volume of her writings, noted Texas diarist Lizzie Neblett is purported to have become so infuriated by “the audacious behavior of one Neblett slave, Joe...that she contemplated shooting his mule. In another instance, when her overseer informed her that he might have to kill a few slaves in order to keep discipline among them, Lizzie counseled him not to kill them, but conceded that, if necessary, he could shoot at their legs.”⁵⁵⁵ Far from being ‘shielded from the horrific

⁵⁵³ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, ix.

⁵⁵⁴ Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, ix-xi.

⁵⁵⁵ Elizabeth Scott Neblett and Erika L. Murr, *A Rebel Wife in Texas: The Diary and Letters of Elizabeth Scott Neblett, 1852-1864*, Edited by Erika L. Murr (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): Location no. 395.

realities' of chattel slavery, women like Neblett were often central to the construction of these horrors.

In spite of this, those writing about white women who enslaved—or were married to men who enslaved—Black people have long posited these individuals as goodwill ambassadors “inspired by duty to care for their dependents...[and] fulfill the expectations of Southern womanhood.”⁵⁵⁶ This characterization pivots on an understanding of the plantation in which “prudent mistresses curbed their tempers whenever possible” and in so doing “humanized an inhuman institution.”⁵⁵⁷ Tales like those of Martha Gibbs' illegal death march or Lizzie Neblett's dreams of retributive livestock slaughter reveal, however, that in fact planter women often had little incentive and even less inclination to curb their tempers, and in many cases resorted to violence with more regularity and greater extremity than the men in their lives.

Often this violence was uniquely gendered in nature, as white women—rather than bonding together with enslaved women* in the fight against patriarchy, as some have suggested—channeled their anxieties about and solidified their positions in the social hierarchy above Black women* by cutting their hair, mocking their performances of femininity, and sometimes even “beat[ing]...them in ways so disturbing that historians have judged them barbaric.”⁵⁵⁸ Such barbarism is evident in the recollections of Alabaman Delia Garlic, whose descriptions of the treatment she received from her

⁵⁵⁶ Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 74.

⁵⁵⁷ Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 84.

⁵⁵⁸ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 5.

(widowed) enslaver's second wife are as illuminative as they are gruesome. "I seed his wife blackin' her eyebrows wid smut one day," Garlic explains, "So I thought I'd black mine jes' for fun. I rubbed some smut on my eyebrows an' forgot to rub it off, an' she kitched me."⁵⁵⁹ Despite having only committed the most minor of transgressions, Delia recalls that her mistress was "powerful mad an' yelled: 'You Black devil, I'll show you how to mock your betters.' Den she pick up a stick of stovewood an' flails it ag'in' my head. I didn't know nothin' more 'till I come to, lyin' on the floor."⁵⁶⁰

By positioning herself as one of Garlic's "betters" before unceremoniously knocking her unconscious with a piece of kindling, Mrs. Carter makes clear that her intention is not only to assert her power over or even discipline the woman her husband enslaves, but also to (brutally) maintain the boundaries around and access to white womanhood. Given that Carter would likely have perceived practices such as applying makeup to one's eyebrows as retaining their value if only certain kinds of people had the ability to do so, Delia's appropriation of an act as simple as 'rubbing smut' on her face threatened the delineations that lent women like Carter their elevated social statuses and engendered a violent and demeaning response. This response was compounded after Garlic awakened, as she overheard her mistress telling those assembled nearby "I thought her thick skull and cap of wool could take it better than that."⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ Delia Garlic, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

⁵⁶⁰ Delia Garlic, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

⁵⁶¹ Delia Garlic, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

Interestingly (and somewhat paradoxically), despite such efforts to differentiate themselves from enslaved Black women*, plantation mistresses routinely likened their experiences to a life of bondage, often in the very moments in which they benefited most from the exertions of the actually enslaved. Lizzie Neblett, for instance, spoke repeatedly of her disdain for the expectation that as a landed, married Southern woman she had to constantly reproduce—a process she found particularly vexing. In a letter to her husband dated March 28, 1864, Neblett writes “you desired children no doubt, you have had them cheap, they never cost you a single pain. You found me...a very selfish [wife] it is true—but I am to be pitied, for *I am an unwilling slave*, made so by nature, yet *designed to be a slave*”⁵⁶² [emphasis mine]. The irony in comparing to slavery her own lot in life, which included the bearing and rearing of multiple children as well as the necessity of managing her family’s plantation during her husband’s stint as a Confederate soldier (none of which she relished or even particularly enjoyed), is that this lot was made considerably more comfortable by the presence of Black women* and girls Neblett herself helped to enslave.

After the birth of her fifth child, Lizzie “borrowed a female slave, Polly...to assist her with childcare. [She], however, did not believe that Polly, who was perhaps seven or eight years old, relieved her of her motherly duties.”⁵⁶³ Before long, Neblett was complaining to her husband that “Polly is too small to do anything for the baby...& consequently my attention to the baby takes up so much time.”⁵⁶⁴ In reality, this depiction

⁵⁶² Neblett and Murr, *A Rebel Wife In Texas*, Location no. 6429-6444.

⁵⁶³ Neblett and Murr, *A Rebel Wife In Texas*, Location no. 386.

⁵⁶⁴ Neblett and Murr, *A Rebel Wife In Texas*, Location no. 386.

of domestic life conveniently downplays the extent to which Neblett depended on the care work relegated to Polly and others, which allowed her to retain something of a life of leisure even amidst her claims of gendered enslavement. “When Bettie [Lizzie’s daughter] sometimes woke [Neblett] up at 4 a.m., she would dress the baby, hand her to Polly or another female slave, and return to bed where she might sleep ‘till daylight, sun up, & often after sun up.”⁵⁶⁵ Thus, however beleaguered planter women thought themselves to be within the context of the plantation South, they relied on enslaved Black women* (and their own extractions from them) to violently shore up the parameters of their racialized understandings of self and to lessen—or perhaps even eliminate—the need for them to perform labor.

These extractions also at times consisted of forms of violence which seem to indicate that plantation mistresses’ assumed use of enslaved women’s* bodies did not exclude the prurient. In her harrowing autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, author Harriet Jacobs details the means by which her enslaver, Dr. Flint, repeatedly attempted to coerce her into a sexual relationship. His efforts soon raised the suspicions of his wife, and though she subsequently confronted Jacobs in anger, Mrs. Flint initially seemed to have “some touch of feeling for [Harriet],” to whom she “spoke kindly and promised to protect.”⁵⁶⁶ Jacobs put little stock in these assurances however, as she

⁵⁶⁵ Neblett and Murr, *A Rebel Wife In Texas*, Location no. 386.

⁵⁶⁶ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover Publications, 2001): 31.

perceived her mistress to be a less than refined woman who “had not much control over her passions.”⁵⁶⁷

Perhaps it was these very passions that led Mrs. Flint to (at least temporarily) thwart her husband’s effort to compel Jacobs to share his bedchamber—which would have given him the access he intended—and take the enslaved woman* instead “to sleep in a room adjoining her own.”⁵⁶⁸ In this space, Jacobs explains, “I was an object of [Mrs. Flint’s] especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me.”⁵⁶⁹ But though this vigilance might otherwise be interpreted as her mistress’ attempt to shield Harriet from Dr. Flint’s unwanted attentions, the rest of Jacob’s recollection implies another impetus entirely. “Sometimes I woke up, and found [Mrs. Flint] bending over me. At other times, she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me... You can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must produce to wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman bending over you.”⁵⁷⁰

While it is clear Jacobs is implying here that her mistress’ envy is directed at Harriet herself, whom Mrs. Flint would have seen as somehow tempting her husband to stray, it is not altogether obvious that this is the case—or at the very least, there may have been additional elements at play. In fact, as Clare Sears points out, such a reading possibly “obscures the white woman’s own erotic interests in Jacobs, including her desire

⁵⁶⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

⁵⁶⁸ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

⁵⁶⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

⁵⁷⁰ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

for sexual access and domination. After all, white women entered complex power-laden relationships with enslaved women, and multiple opportunities for coercive sex existed.”⁵⁷¹ If Jacobs was in fact “an object of [Mrs. Flint’s] jealousy,”⁵⁷² such a framing begs the question of whom exactly her mistress was jealous: Harriet, or Dr. Flint?

The ambiguity with which Jacobs writes about this sequence of events perhaps signals her recognition, though she does not state it outright, “that white women [were] part of the system of degradation and domination” on which the chattel slavery system was predicated. It may also be indicative of her resultant unwillingness “to assume they [were] natural allies.”⁵⁷³ Jacobs’ admission that she “knew [she] could not expect kindness or confidence from her [mistress] under the circumstances in which she was placed”⁵⁷⁴ (namely, being subject to nightly visits and whispered propositions from her enslaver’s wife) effectually undercuts the longstanding, hegemonic “fantasy of white female innocence that sleeps quietly while the master” sexually exploits enslaved Black women*—a fantasy which “obfuscates the reality of the violent and violating white female body.”⁵⁷⁵

Despite the potential for these types of violations, however, enslaved Black women* and their mistresses (as well as formerly enslaved Black women* and their white woman employers) routinely developed deep attachments to one another stemming

⁵⁷¹ Sears, “Centering Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Queer History,” 41.

⁵⁷² Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

⁵⁷³ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 31.

⁵⁷⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 31.

⁵⁷⁵ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 34.

from and at times strengthened by their physical proximity. And while these connections did little to mitigate the power dynamics separating such individuals, formerly enslaved women's* reminiscences of them allow for (and perhaps even necessitate) careful scrutiny of "the irresolute pleasures between slave women and the mistress."⁵⁷⁶

Especially rich sites for investigation include those pre- and post-Emancipation spaces where women* were dancing—particularly with each other. In her interview for the WPA, Mandy from Alabama answers in the negative when asked if she likes to dance, explaining that she is "j'ined to de Church" (and likely would have considered dancing sinful). She adds that "Miss Emily showed me some white folks dancin' oncet," but appears to have no great fondness for the memory, as Mandy believed the style of dance required participants to get "too clost togedder."⁵⁷⁷ Arkansan Mittie Freeman, on the other hand, recalls having a very different (and seemingly more pleasurable) experience. When prompted to talk about the music of her youth, Freeman proclaims, "Sure did have purty music them days... Could they play the fiddle in them days, unh, unh! Lordy, iffen I could take you back and show you that handsome white lady what put me on the floor and learned me to dance the contillion!"⁵⁷⁸

Stephanie M.H. Camp describes in *Closer to Freedom* the dances and "illicit parties" enslaved Black people would (often covertly) organize as a means of both resisting enslavers' control and finding temporary "release from [the] drudgery and

⁵⁷⁶ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 56.

⁵⁷⁷ Mandy, *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young.

⁵⁷⁸ Mittie Freeman, interview with Beulah Sherwood Hagg, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

sorrow”⁵⁷⁹ of chattel slavery. This resistance was often impeded by the attendance of overseers and white slaveholders at these events, though in this case, the presence of a “handsome white lady”—ostensibly of the planter class—seems to have represented not (solely) surveillance and imposition, but a wealth of other, potentially queer possibilities. Mittie’s story, then, emblemizes the narratives of other nineteenth century Black women* like “Stagecoach” Mary Fields, whose complicated, messy, intimate, and irresolute interactions with white women this chapter takes up, in all of their many complexities.

LOYALTY, LOVE, OR NONE OF THE ABOVE?: BLACK WOMEN’S* WILL AND MOBILITY

In a thorough, if outdated, biography of Mother Mary Amadeus (born Sarah Dunne), the interstate move that initiated Mary Fields’ time on the frontier is framed within the familiar (and problematic) trope of the faithful servant. The text explains that when Mother Stanislaus (one of the members of the rescue party dispatched in early 1885) left the Montana community, she also left behind:

...many tokens of her generous love, and a mighty helper in the person of Mary Fields. Mary Fields was a colored woman, strong as a man, who remembered slavery, and who had been a confidential servant in the house of Judge Dunn, Mother Amadeus’ oldest brother. When Mrs. Dunne died, [Mary] had brought the children from Florida to Toledo, where Mother Amadeus was Superior, and she remained there. When the news of Mother Amadeus’ illness reached Toledo, she followed Mother Stanislaus out West. She loved Mother [Amadeus] with the devotion of her race, and she elected to live...at St. Peter’s mission.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁹ Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 61.

⁵⁸⁰ *Life of the Rev. Mother Amadeus of the Heart of Jesus: Foundress of the Ursuline Missions of Montana And Alaska* (New York: Paulist Press, 1923): 95.

Yet this characterization rings hollow, due both to its flawed racial logics and its ultimate lack of explanatory power. It is highly unlikely that “the devotion of her race” would have been enough to compel Fields to abandon the cosmopolitan hub of which she had grown increasingly fond in order to trek over a thousand miles and take up residence amid the utter unfamiliarity and course conditions of the late nineteenth century Montana Territory.

In fact, by all accounts, Fields was enjoying her time in Toledo immensely when Mother Amadeus’ assemblage sent word that their leader was ailing. Her days were spent working for “Sacred Heart Convent and the affiliated parochial school” and her nights often involved “attending...musical and political events for which she had cultivated an enthusiasm.”⁵⁸¹ Mary’s decision, then, to travel to a “harsh but majestic hinterland” to make her home once again with her long-time companion, “who clearly could not accomplish all of the fundamental essentials alone,”⁵⁸² would necessarily have pivoted on a motivation significantly more substantial than the brand of fealty to which Mother Stanislaus gestures. Given this, the description she provides reads more as an (unsuccessful) attempt to make sense of and perhaps normalize the cryptic and at times even subversive relationship between Mother Amadeus and Mary Fields, which seemed to defy and exceed the stereotypical bounds of ‘slave loyalty.’

Actor and amateur historian Gary Cooper makes a similar attempt in his *Ebony* profile on Fields, likening her and Mother Amadeus’ connection to the one that exists

⁵⁸¹ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 152.

⁵⁸² McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 152.

between a mother and her child. He explains that by 1903, Mother Amadeus had been “sent to Alaska to start new missions.”⁵⁸³ He adds that though her successor, a Mother Angela, “tried to mother Mary as best she could...there never could have been another Mother Amadeus.”⁵⁸⁴ In context however, this interpretation borders on the bizarre, given that Fields would have been in her seventies at this time and likely not in the market for another mother *and* considering that Mother Amadeus, who was ostensibly fulfilling this role prior to Mother Angela’s appointment (at least, according to Cooper) was Fields’ junior by a significant number of years.

Rather, Fields’ solicitousness toward the mother superior (along with that which she received in turn) hints at an intimacy that extends beyond the paternalistic. Numerous accounts describe how, upon making her way to the spartan dwelling where a pneumonia-stricken Mother Amadeus was staying that first winter, Fields “rushed to comfort her and nursed her back to good health,”⁵⁸⁵ before opting to stay on and help the fledgling mission (literally) survive. In time, sturdier stone living quarters were constructed, and Bishop Brondel—who, years before, had assumed authority over the Montana Ursuline Motherhouse with which Fields was affiliated—came down to help Mary and the assembled sisters move from the log cabins in which they’d been staying, “but no one dared move anything belonging to Mother Amadeus, [as] it was a job Mary had cut out for herself.”⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸³ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 100.

⁵⁸⁴ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 100.

⁵⁸⁵ Boyd, “The Intrepid Mary Fields.”

⁵⁸⁶ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 98.

Of course, such ministrations could be understood as the actions of an especially committed employee, except there is extensive evidence that Fields “refused, more than once, to accept a salary for her work.”⁵⁸⁷ This fact is astonishing given that this work included but was not limited to freighting, laundry duties (including personally laundering—at Fields’ own insistence—Mother Amadeus’s sacristy clothing), and building a hennery which she then also managed. Fields forged through the ice and snow on countless occasions, warding off both wildlife and hypothermia in order to procure supplies for her companion and their associates—a job she was content and indeed prepared to perform the duration of her time on earth, given “the agreement made between herself and Mary Amadeus: [that] she would remain with the Ursulines for the rest of her life.”⁵⁸⁸ If such sacrifice was undertaken as neither a manifestation of some kind of race-based loyalty nor an attempt to make money, then the obvious question becomes: why? Why would Fields follow Mother Amadeus first to Toledo and then to Montana, extracting herself from a position of relative comfort only to subject herself, *for free*, to the dangerous and the unknown?

One way to frame these decisions is to position them, as McConnell does, as ‘acts of love’—though such a framing is laden with its own erasures and prevarications. As Hershini Young notes in *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*, “the notion of ‘love,’ no matter how qualified, appears repeatedly when scholars describe the fraught relationships between slave women and their [former]

⁵⁸⁷ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 154.

⁵⁸⁸ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 154.

owners,”⁵⁸⁹ in spite of the fact that “the exclusion of slaves from the social contract renders ‘consent’”—and by extension, love—“absurd within the context of slavery.”⁵⁹⁰

Although Fields had been emancipated twenty years prior to her decision to relocate to Montana, the social realities and power imbalances characterizing the lives of Mary and the sister of her former enslaver would have been as central in shaping the two women’s* interactions as any feeling that may have existed between them. It perhaps makes more sense, then, to frame the pair’s narrative (and especially Fields’ actions within it) as a matter of will, rather than love. That is, given the relative absence of Mary’s own words about her relationship with Mother Amadeus, it may be productive to “engage with [that] absence rather than merely attempting to fill the void” with stories of amour that “change the landscape of slavery from one of brutal domination to a kinder, gentler world of secret passions...and forbidden loves.”⁵⁹¹ Such engagement begins with examining Fields’ behavior (in lieu of written or recorded declarations of her intentions, to which we have little access), as well as the behavior of her companion, in order to glean how the former opted to forge an interracial connection that was neither extricable from nor reducible to the structural limitations undergirding it.

Doing so allows for a perhaps more incisive way to parse the two individuals’ intense attachment to one another, exemplified both by grand gestures such as the braving of a Montana winter and small courtesies like attending to one another’s personal

⁵⁸⁹ Hershini Young, *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 86.

⁵⁹⁰ Young, *Illegible Will*, 91.

⁵⁹¹ Young, *Illegible Will*, 86.

possessions. For her part, Mother Amadeus' investment in the couple's shared bond was illustrated most clearly in the days and months following the shootout that resulted in Mary's dismissal from the mission (detailed in Chapter Two). After attempting to advocate for Fields to no avail (and despite the fact that she had been directly ordered by Bishop Brondel to "send that black woman away")⁵⁹² Mother Amadeus outright refused to part with her companion in any way other than the symbolic. Indeed, excerpts from the sisters' annals elaborated on how it "[was] hard for Mother to dismiss [Mary] and one tremble[ed] to think of Mother's sorrow—and trouble in so doing," which she seems to have overcome by immediately devising strategies to keep Fields both nearby and in relative comfort.

These involved, first, setting Fields up in the restaurant business in Cascade, where she "cooked, cleaned, and served the locals, including cowboys and sheepherders who often could not pay their bills. Because of this generosity, she was forced to close [her café] nine months later."⁵⁹³ After this, it is often reported that Mother Amadeus "went to the government" (likely without the bishop's knowledge) "and asked that Mary be given [a] mail route."⁵⁹⁴ While this is unlikely, given that "the Post Office Department did not hire or employ mail carriers for star routes [but rather] awarded star route contracts to persons who proposed the lowest qualified bids,"⁵⁹⁵ it is generally accepted that Amadeus had something to do with Mary receiving the route. This turn of events not

⁵⁹² Cooper, "Stagecoach Mary," 98.

⁵⁹³ McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom," 156.

⁵⁹⁴ Cooper, "Stagecoach Mary," 98.

⁵⁹⁵ McConnell, "Mary Fields' Road to Freedom," 157.

only allowed Fields to make a living using many of the skills she had sharpened during her time at the mission, but it also came with the added bonus of providing her with a reason to visit Mother Amadeus on a daily basis even after being banished months before. “Mary [was given] the route between Cascade and the mission itself,” Cooper reports, “And each day, never missing a one, she made her triumphant entry into the mission seated on top of the mail coach dressed in a man's hat and coat and smoking a huge cigar.”⁵⁹⁶

Again, however, it is important to contextualize this triumph—and indeed the entirety of Fields’ relationship with Mother Amadeus—lest we be tempted to mistakenly read this story as a romance. That the two met (and grew close) while Fields was enslaved by a member of Amadeus’ family is relevant, as it marked their association from the outset as one shaped by power, inequality, and subjection. Touching stories of mutual care do little to change the fact that even in the years after Emancipation, so much of Fields and Mother Amadeus’ relationship revolved around their unequal access to both authority and resources. Thus, Fields’ time with Mother Amadeus must be read as existing at the intersection of two seemingly contradictory entities: the expansive realm of queer potential and the limiting ubiquity of racial oppression.

Both are present in the narrative of North Carolinian Fanny Cannady, who “wuzn’t much more den six years ole at de Surrender,” and yet marks at the outset of her WPA interview one memory in particular which seems to indicate her awareness of and

⁵⁹⁶ Cooper, “Stagecoach Mary,” 98.

proximity to the quotidian violence of chattel slavery (especially that enacted by her own enslaver). “I... ‘member how Marse Jordan shot Leonard Allen, one of his slaves,” Cannady explains, adding, “I ain’t never forgot dat.”⁵⁹⁷ In fact, many of Fanny’s reminiscences center around the persistent presence of her enslaver’s brutality, which—though not always rising to the level of manslaughter—consisted of Jordan’s insistence on overworking those he enslaved and seeking to sustain racial hierarchies by recruiting others of the planter class to assist in his cruelty.

These efforts underlie the story Cannady tells about her mother, who acted as cook for the family by whom she was enslaved. Though Fanny is adamant that her mistress, Sally, was “sweet an’ kind” when “Marse Jordan wuzn’t ‘roun’,” she acknowledges that when he *was* around “everythin’ he told [Miss Sally] to do she done”—up to and including violence against the Black women* performing domestic labor in her home. According to Cannady, Jordan “made [Miss Sally] slap Mammy one time kaze when she passed his coffee she spilled some in de saucer. Mis’ Sally hit Mammy easy, but Marse Jordan say: ‘Hit her, Sally, hit de Black bitch like she ‘zerve to be hit.’”⁵⁹⁸ Unwilling to defy her husband, “Miss Sally [drew] back her hand an’ hit Mammy in de face, pow, den she went back to her place at de table an’ play like she eatin’ her breakfas’.”⁵⁹⁹ Thus, despite Sally’s initial reticence to forcefully strike Fanny’s

⁵⁹⁷ Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁵⁹⁸ Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁵⁹⁹ Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

mother, Cannady resists in her retelling “positing white femininity as essentially innocent in the workings of power.”⁶⁰⁰ Given that—rather than choosing to protect the woman* her husband enslaved at the likely expense of her own comfort—Sally capitulated to Jordan’s calls for abuse, this recollection highlights the ways that “white women were not passive observers in the daily running of the slave household,”⁶⁰¹ but rather active participants.

It is what happened next, however, that imbues this tale with queer possibility. “When Marse Jordan leave,” Cannady continues, “[Miss Sally] come in de kitchen an’ put her arms ‘roun’ Mammy an’ cry, an’ Mammy pat her on de back an’ she cry too.”⁶⁰² This act of contrition, while providing little in the way of redress, signals a depth of feeling between Sally and Fanny’s mother, who appear to have been bonded together not only by the pair’s presumably shared fear of Jordan, but also by a kind of mutual affection. This is made even more apparent in Cannady’s memories of a conversation between the two women* she overheard immediately after Emancipation:

When de war ended Mis’ Sally come to Mammy an’ say: ‘Fanny, I’s sho glad yo’s free. Yo’ can go now an’ yo’ won’ ever have to be er slave no more.’ But Mammy, she ain’t had no notion of leavin’ Mis’ Sally. She put her arms ‘roun’ her an’ call her Baby, an’ tell her she goin’ to stay wid her long as she live. An’ she did stay wid her...Mammy stayed [with] Mis’ Sally ‘twell she died.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰⁰ Young, *Illegible Will*, 89.

⁶⁰¹ Young, *Illegible Will*, 94.

⁶⁰² Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶⁰³ Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

Both the intimate physicality and the casual use of affectionate pet names in these exchanges are notable, with both individuals repeatedly initiating stolen embraces (always in the absence of Sally’s husband) and demonstrating a familiarity with one another that perhaps exceeds the platonic. It is *also* notable that Fanny’s mother pledges to remain with Sally for the rest of her life, despite having been given the legal option to leave—a pledge that mirrors the one made by Mary Fields to Mother Amadeus, some two decades later.

But although this choice may have stemmed in part from the formerly enslaved woman’s* attachment to her erstwhile mistress, it was not made in a context in which such a reading can serve as the only explanation. In a period where the recently liberated were often brought back by force to the plantations they were attempting to leave after the War (if not outright murdered), is Cannady’s mother’s decision best understood as an instance of queer complexity, a response to ongoing societal forces, or both? That is, “if the slave woman’s ‘yes’ and ‘no’ result in similar circumstances...then her consent, like her non-consent, becomes illegible.”⁶⁰⁴ Thus, even though Fanny’s mother did “say yes” to remaining in her former mistress’ employ—and *even if* that yes was rooted on some level in her desire to remain in proximity with the woman of whom she seemed exceedingly fond—in the absence of truly “unencumbered choice,”⁶⁰⁵ “what was she saying yes to?”⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Young, *Illegible Will*, 90-92.

⁶⁰⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making In Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 104.

⁶⁰⁶ Young, *Illegible Will*, 92.

Similar questions inhere in the narrative of North Carolinian Betty Cofer. Born on her enslaver's plantation "three miles north of Bethania" in 1856, Cofer recalls being "claimed" as an infant by her mistress' young daughter, Ella Jones (an event she describes as a stroke of luck); she recounts that the two "played together and grew up together."⁶⁰⁷ Even early on in life, however, the power differentials between the two girls were evident. "I waited on [Miss Ella] an' most times slept on the floor in her room," Cofer explains, adding, "Muh was cook an' when I done got big enough I holped to set the table in the big dining room. Then I'd put on a clean white apron an' ...stand behind Miss Ella's chair,"⁶⁰⁸ where the young mistress would often sneak Betty pieces of food from her plate. As in the case of Mary Fields, Cofer and Ella seemed to have formed a bond (rooted as much in subjection as affection) while Betty was still enslaved by her childhood playmate and confidante's family.

This bond persisted even after Emancipation; Cofer recalls that "When we was freed Pappy come to get Muh and me [but] we stayed around here. Where could we go? [...] I couldn't go far away from Miss Ella."⁶⁰⁹ And lest her interviewer attribute this decision to remain close by as an indication of "the devotion of her race" or a sense of loyalty to the Joneses as a whole, Betty clarifies, "The rest of the family was all fine folks

⁶⁰⁷ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶⁰⁸ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶⁰⁹ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

and good to me but I loved Miss Ella better'n anyone or anythin' else in the world.”⁶¹⁰ (A proclamation made all the more telling by the fact that Cofer had long since married by the time of her WPA interview.)

Interestingly, Betty describes her relationship with her former enslaver's daughter as one of reciprocity, noting “If I ever wanted for anythin' I just asked [Miss Ella] an she give it to me or got it for me somehow...[And] I always did what I could for her too an' stood by her.”⁶¹¹ Once again this language of love and mutual care requires evaluation that is both queer and critical, as it is “based on the notion of [tacit] contract, but the coercive alchemy at work in the transformation of human beings into property pressures this language.”⁶¹² Parsing the nuances of a relationship that began with one person's ‘claim’ over another, and was marked by both shared memories and grave disparity means making space for the fact that Betty understood herself as having loved Ella *and* the fact that love—in a context of ownership and oppression—is not possible.

Regardless of how their connection might be classified, however, it proved a significant force in Cofer's life, even as she reached old age and Ella had passed on.

Toward the end of her transcript, Betty recalls:

Miss Ella died two years ago. I was sick in the hospital but the doctor come to tell me. I couldn't go to her buryin'. I sure [miss] her. ([Interviewer's note:]Poignant grief moistens Betty's eyes and thickens her voice.) There wasn't ever no one like her. [The rest of the family] still live at 'the house'...but it don't seem right with Miss Ella gone. Life seems dif'rent, some how, 'though there' lots of my young

⁶¹⁰ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶¹¹ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶¹² Young, *Illegible Will*, 92.

white folks an' my own kin livin' round an' they're real good to me. But Miss Ella's gone!⁶¹³

With this, Cofer distinguishes herself as one of the numerous nineteenth century Black women* (including Mary Fields and Fanny Cannady's mother) whose willful enactments of constrained agency in their interactions with white mistresses raise uncomfortable questions and call for a wholesale rethinking of the ways power, mobility, and sexuality were navigated and negotiated by the formerly enslaved.

'ANNIE HAD MAMMY SLEEP RIGHT IN BED WID HER:' BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN'S* SHARED INTIMACIES

Famed modiste Elizabeth Keckley was born in Virginia in 1818 and spent much of her early life in bondage, enslaved first by a Col. Armistead Burwell, who put her to work as nursemaid for his infant daughter when Keckley herself was still a young child. Ten years later, at the age of fourteen, Elizabeth was sent to live with one of her enslaver's sons (a Presbyterian minister) and his cruel wife, an experience marked by overwork (as the young couple was poor and could not afford additional 'servants') as well as unspeakable violence. Having decided early on that Keckley possessed a "stubborn pride"⁶¹⁴ and willful spirit, her new mistress, within a few years of Keckley's arrival, became "desirous to wreak vengeance"⁶¹⁵ on Elizabeth and sought the aid of both her husband and a local schoolmaster in her machinations. Over the course of an

⁶¹³ Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶¹⁴ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2015): Location no. 195.

⁶¹⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, Location no. 165.

indeterminate amount of time, the pair dispensed repeated and brutal beatings meant to cow the young woman* into submission (though Keckley maintains that these efforts were not successful). Elizabeth was also repeatedly assaulted during this period by a white man whose name she chooses not to disclose, resulting in the birth of her first and only child, a son named George.

Eventually, Keckley was able to leave North Carolina (the site of these abuses) and take up residence in the home of her former enslaver's son-in-law, Hugh Garland, where she was also reunited with her mother. This reprieve would quickly prove pyrrhic, however, as Keckley—who had once been told by her enslaver that she “would never be worth [her] salt”⁶¹⁶—began taking in sewing work in order to prevent the necessity of having her aging mother hired out to neighbors. Soon she was supporting the entire household, which consisted of seventeen people, including the Garlands. In time, Elizabeth—contemplating marriage to a James Keckley, and unwilling to bring more children into the world via this union who would undoubtedly be born into slavery—approached her enslaver about the possibility of purchasing her and her son's freedom. Garland was initially unreceptive to this proposal, given his complete financial dependence on Keckley, but ultimately agreed to the amount of twelve hundred dollars, which Elizabeth—with the assistance of several monied acquaintances—was eventually able to raise. Upon obtaining her liberty, Keckley left her husband (whom she described

⁶¹⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, Location no. 94.

as dissipated and dishonest), traveled to Baltimore, and finally relocated to Washington, D.C.

With this latter move Keckley was able to begin establishing a name for herself as an accomplished seamstress, working for (among others) the wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who employed Keckley in the months leading up to the start of the American Civil War. After a while, Elizabeth was able to draw on these and other connections to land an interview with first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, with whom she would come to develop an intense, intimate, and ultimately exploitative relationship. Lincoln—notorious for her mercurial nature and unpredictable impulses—counted Keckley among her closest confidantes, even as she repeatedly took advantage of the formerly enslaved modiste by placing her in untenable circumstances and at times even neglecting to pay her for services rendered.

The tumult between the two women eventually spiraled into an estrangement after Lincoln garnered scandal in her efforts to raise money upon the death of her husband, and Keckley wrote a tell-all book—entitled *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*—detailing the experience. Though the text was meant to defend her former patron’s actions, the 1868 publication of Keckley’s work triggered anxieties about the possibility of Black laborers publicly airing their employers’ dirty laundry, and thus was met with near-universal scorn. On a personal level, Lincoln

considered Elizabeth's turn as a "colored historian"⁶¹⁷ to be an unforgivable betrayal, and promptly ceased all contact with her long-time companion.

Central to (or perhaps compounding) this feeling of betrayal was the inclusion, toward the end of the autobiography, of numerous letters Lincoln had written to Keckley months earlier. (Notably, it is likely that these missives were appended at the behest of editor James Redpath, without Keckley's knowledge or consent.)⁶¹⁸ The exposure of Lincoln's private thoughts, regardless of whether Keckley knowingly participated in this exposure, would almost certainly have been viewed by the former first lady as violating "nineteenth-century standards of decorum and propriety" as well as "disrupt[ing] prevailing rhetorical conventions about class, gender, and race and breech[ing] the divide between the public and private spheres that historically had protected the reputations of well-known political figures like Mary Lincoln."⁶¹⁹ Further, it seems entirely feasible that beyond the social transgressions *Behind the Scenes* represented, Lincoln may have also harbored some concerns about how the events outlined in the book, along with the content of her letters—many of which were equal parts frantic and intimate in nature—might be (queerly) read by those who perused the text.

What might readers make, for instance, of Lincoln's less-than-explicit but still openly suggestive vow that she longed for the day when she would be able to return

⁶¹⁷ Janaka B. Lewis, "Elizabeth Keckley and Freedom's Labor," *African American Review* 49 (2016): 15.

⁶¹⁸ Lisa Shawn Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln: Elizabeth Keckley and the Rhetoric of Intimate Disclosure," *Southern Communication Journal* 78 (2013): 408.

⁶¹⁹ Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 406.

Keckley's many kindnesses "in *more* than words?"⁶²⁰ Given that access to "women's private letters...which were never intended to be published permits the [public] to explore a very private world of emotional realities,"⁶²¹ Lincoln may have been unwilling to leave it to a critical and censorious audience to speculate as to the motives underlying such proclamations. To be sure, when Lincoln penned the words "Oh! That I could see you. Write me, dear Lizzie, if only a line...I remain always your affectionate friend,"⁶²² her intention was for Keckley and Keckley alone to read them; how much of her drastic reaction to their publication, then, may be attributed to her fear that an outside observer might detect queer undercurrents within this correspondence?

Such conclusions would perhaps be more readily drawn by those familiar with the purported (emotional *and* physical) closeness between the two women*. Following the assassination of Lincoln's husband in 1865, Mary isolated herself from everyone but her two living sons and Keckley, who went above and beyond in her attempts to comfort the grieving widow. By some accounts, the modiste even slept nightly in Lincoln's room (ostensibly sharing a bed) and "watch[ed] faithfully by her side."⁶²³ Read alongside Lincoln's heartfelt letters to Keckley, these reports might have raised further questions

⁶²⁰ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, Location no. 2529.

⁶²¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985): 55.

, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985): 55.

⁶²² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, Location no. 2251.

⁶²³ Peter Cozzens, "Mrs. Lincoln's Confidante," *HistoryNet*, 2013.

about the nature of the pair's relationship, especially since "women together, especially in bed together...were not above suspicion."⁶²⁴

In her work *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, Martha Vicinus takes up this issue of women* in bed together and the interpretive potential it represents, examining nineteenth century court records in order to evaluate the ways Victorian era society sought to contend with (or rather, sought to avoid contending with) the "unnamable possibility" of queerness between women*. She notes that throughout this period "respectable men and women struggled to articulate in public uncertain distinctions and practices—sexual acts that were all too easy to imagine, but impossible to accept." To demonstrate, Vicinus recounts the particularly illuminative, highly publicized Codrington divorce trial, which involved "a well-known [British] feminist, Emily Faithfull, as well as a distinguished admiral."⁶²⁵

After the deployment of the admiral to the Crimea, his wife Helen Codrington asked Faithfull, with whom she was acquainted, to move into her home. The two women lived together from 1854 to 1857 and—according to the admiral—upon his return in 1856, he found that his wife would at times share a bed with Faithfull (who had continued living with the Codringtons). Eventually, he claimed, his wife ceased sharing his bed entirely and "insisted on having a separate bed and sleeping with Miss Faithfull."⁶²⁶ Eventually, the admiral sought the assistance of Helen's parents and

⁶²⁴ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 61.

⁶²⁵ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 69.

⁶²⁶ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 71.

Faithfull was made to take up residence elsewhere (though she still kept in touch with her friend); however, as Vicinus puts it “Henry Codrington was still caught up in a queer triangle.”⁶²⁷

This dynamic came to a head in 1863 after Admiral Codrington filed for divorce from his wife, prompting the public disclosure of previously private aspects of the two’s relationship. Helen accused her husband of refusing to escort her in public, denying her access to her closest friends, giving her limited control over her domestic sphere, and—perhaps most revealingly—attempting to take “improper liberties”⁶²⁸ with Emily Faithfull years earlier while the two women shared a bed. Faithfull corroborated this account, signing an affidavit stating that the admiral had attempted to assault her (though she later recanted, ostensibly to protect her reputation from incipient rumors about her sexuality).

Vicinus posits that on the night in question, the admiral was likely surveilling the two women rather than—as he claimed—checking the fire in their room, infuriated by their intimacy. The disparities between the various accounts of this incident make it likely that, as in the case of Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln, “we can never know the true nature of”⁶²⁹ the relationship between Emily Faithfull and Helen Codrington. “But what richer image do we need,” Vicinus asks, “than an invitation to join a beloved friend in bed on a cold night?”⁶³⁰ (Especially when that image was enough to spur Helen’s

⁶²⁷ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 72.

⁶²⁸ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 73.

⁶²⁹ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 69.

⁶³⁰ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 69.

husband to erratic acts of jealousy, signaling his awareness of queer, ‘unnamable possibilities’ even as he endeavored to extinguish them.)

In the context of the pre-Emancipation United States South, the image of women* embracing such possibilities engendered similar responses from envious husbands, especially when those women* appeared to seek intimacy across racial lines. In an 1854 court filing, Virginia slaveholder Archibald Drew requested a divorce from his wife Lucy Ann, explaining that he had been “informed by various persons of [Lucy Ann’s] infidelity and adultery.”⁶³¹ A witness in the case, Thomas Moody, testified that Drew’s wife coerced those enslaved in her household to help facilitate these extramarital affairs, recounting that upon arriving at the Drew residence one day for a visit, “the black girl named Agness who waited on Mrs. Drew in a quick an excited manner exclaimed 'Mr. Moody don’t go in there, don’t go in there' but it was too late;”⁶³² he had caught Lucy Ann *in flagrante delicto*, partially clothed and engaged in a compromising act with a man named Captain Lampkins. However, this account—though salacious—is nearly identical to countless others characterizing divorce filings of the era; it is what Archibald Drew discloses about his wife’s *other* alleged indiscretions that proves telling.

Court documents note that by the time he and his wife had separated, Drew was “of the opinion that Lucy Ann ‘visited houses of ill fame, known brothels and was on

⁶³¹ Archibald Drew, *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864)*.

⁶³² Archibald Drew, *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864)*.

terms of the greatest intimacy with lewd and common women.”⁶³³ As this accusation lacked specificity, outside observers (as well as, presumably, the judge) were left to infer just what exactly Archibald was accusing his wife of. Interestingly, Drew does not seem to be implying that Lucy Ann was herself engaged in sex work, but rather that she frequently visited (and perhaps even patronized) “houses of ill fame” where she kept company with “lewd and common women.” What then, in Drew’s mind, would have constituted “the terms of greatest intimacy” in such interactions? The sharing of a bed? Physical contact? Queer sex?

Fellow Virginian Joseph Magee sought to divorce his wife Margaret the same year as Archibald Drew, and for essentially the same reasons. Magee charged that Margaret had been “too intimate with other men and was guilty of adultery with them.”⁶³⁴ He added that “Margaret [had] ‘visited houses of ill fame, known brothels, and [had] also been on terms of great intimacy with common strumpets.’”⁶³⁵ Presumably one of these “strumpets” would have been Eliza Gallee, a free woman of color whose house, those deposed maintained, was the site of Margaret’s adulterous liaisons. Again, this description—especially in its assertion that Magee’s wife and Gallee were in the habit of sharing domestic and private space—begs the question of exactly what kind of connection the two women*, who were “on terms of greatest intimacy” might have had.

⁶³³ Archibald Drew, *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864)*.

⁶³⁴ Joseph W. Magee, *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864)*.

⁶³⁵ Joseph W. Magee, *Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864)*.

However their bond was constituted, that Eliza was a Black woman* is relevant, as “class and race mattered”⁶³⁶ in the imagining of (and, in this case, punitive response to) nineteenth century queer potentialities. Thus, rather than attempting to impose narratives or concrete sexual identities onto the enigmatic and ambiguous relationships between individuals like Margaret Magee and Eliza Gallee, “we should think [instead] of complex identifications, embedded in class, national, and racial associations.”⁶³⁷

Doing so perhaps lends some clarity to the interview of North Carolinian Lindsey Faucette, in which he discusses at length his mistress’ seeming affinity for his mother, whom her husband enslaved. Faucette tells WPA worker Daisy Whaley that:

Marse John [his enslaver] wuz a great lawyer an’ when he went to Pittsboro an’ other places to practice, if he wuz to stay all night, Mis’ Annie had my mammy sleep right in bed wid her, so she wouldn’t be ‘fraid.⁶³⁸

Though on the surface this account reads as relatively banal—enslaved women* were, after all, frequently required to sleep in their mistresses’ rooms in case any assistance was required during the night—the fact that Faucette’s mother slept *in* Annie’s bed, and on a regular basis, hints at a deeper intimacy. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes, “when husbands traveled, wives routinely [shared space] with other women...Secrets were exchanged and cherished, and the husband’s return at times was viewed with some ambivalence.”⁶³⁹ If such was the case in this instance, it is generative to imagine the

⁶³⁶ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, xxx.

⁶³⁷ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*.

⁶³⁸ Lindsey Faucette, interview with Daisy Whaley, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

⁶³⁹ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 61.

kinds of secrets that may have been exchanged between Annie and the woman* enslaved in her home when in bed together, and how those secrets were bound up as much in power as in potential pleasure.

That is, though scholars have considered the ways, in interactions between nineteenth century women*, “homoerotic teasing and touching were welcome among the bored, who sought to break the monotony of waiting to marry, or to escape a disagreeable husband, or to add excitement” to their lives, little of this research has considered the implications of these activities when participants occupied drastically different racial and social positions. Though the presence of Faucette’s mother in the intimate space of her mistress’ bed may have kept Annie from being “fraid” and might even have served as a pleasurable escape from boredom, it is less clear what it may have represented for the enslaved woman* in question (or, more to the point, whether she was there by choice). Thus, attempting to name the ‘unnamable possibilities’ of the antebellum South necessarily means contending with the fact that “at best, emotional identification and brutality coexisted in [planter women’s] behavior toward slaves,”⁶⁴⁰ and though Black women* regularly undertook (queerly) agential acts of will, that emotional identification and brutality on the part of the white women with whom they formed connections were often inextricable from one another.

⁶⁴⁰ Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 87.

CONCLUSION

In spite of having moved halfway across the country in her mid-fifties for the sole purpose of being reunited with her long-time companion Mother Amadeus, the waning of Mary Fields' final days found her living alone in the racially homogenous and at times hostile Montana town of Cascade. Discriminatory legislation stripped Fields of her beloved handgun, as well as—for a time—her right to socialize in saloons with white acquaintances. Without the fickle protection of Mother Amadeus, who had long since relocated, “Mary Fields’s options were limited, and she was essentially forced into isolation.”⁶⁴¹

Years later in Washington D.C., Elizabeth Keckley faced a similar fate, having been abandoned by her friend and confidante Mary Todd Lincoln for the apparently impermissible transgression of giving voice to her own narrative. Forced by medical constraints to leave her brief teaching appointment with Wilberforce College’s sewing and domestic science arts department, Keckley spent the end of her long and eventful life at D.C.’s National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children, reportedly with a picture of Lincoln hanging over her bed and a quilt of her employer’s old dresses (which, of course, Keckley herself had sewn) still kept among her prized possessions.⁶⁴²

Both stories speak to the reality that for enslaved and formerly enslaved nineteenth century Black women*, forging bonds with white women entailed not only the potential for queer connection, but also an insurmountable level of risk. Such individuals

⁶⁴¹ McConnell, “Mary Fields’ Road to Freedom,” 160.

⁶⁴² Cozzens, “Mrs. Lincoln’s Confidante.”

crept into husbandless bedrooms, battled the elements, and even built henneries in the pursuit of desires that had no name for women offering love that could not exist. These relationships expose both the possibilities as well as the limitations shaping the interactions between Black and white women* in the wake of chattel slavery.

Conclusion: “This Is Not A Story To Pass On”

This is not a story to pass on.

These words, which preface the final lines of Toni Morrison’s haunting 1987 novel *Beloved*,⁶⁴³ animate and inform this text, as the stories of the women* I’ve invoked are not ones that were ever intended to be passed on. These individuals—most of whom were born into slavery—entered and often disappeared from the archive as numbers in a ledger, fecund sites ripe for exploitation. The notion that these women* felt, acted, resisted, or even thought was a riotous one, and yet it is that very notion that this project has worked to take seriously. How *does* one tell a story not meant to be passed on, about people who structured their lives in ways they were never supposed to access?

One way, Daina Ramey Berry suggests in her work *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*, might be to reassess the ways value “as a noun, a verb, and an adjective” was negotiated by the enslaved, who marked themselves as entities that “defied monetization” and “considered conceptions of self in spaces that denied it.”⁶⁴⁴ Mapping these conceptions, attempting to “uncover what the enslaved actually made of their situation”⁶⁴⁵—particularly in instances where their complex existential realities were intersected by the specter of queerness—emerges as a process of not only reclamation but necessity. This is

⁶⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998, 1987).

⁶⁴⁴ Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017): 6.

⁶⁴⁵ Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 6.

especially true given that, as M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us, “the dead do not like to be forgotten.”⁶⁴⁶

The act of remembering, however, is—perhaps by design—markedly more difficult than the act of forgetting was and has been. In *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*, Matt Richardson interrogates “which ancestors...we include in Black memory” and adds, “What happens if Black queers are not remembered [...]? Can Black queer people be the subject of [...] grief?”⁶⁴⁷ The callous dismissal and subsequent death of former buffalo soldier Cathay Williams would seem to indicate that they cannot. “Nothing definite is known of Cathay Williams after the Pension Bureau rejected her claim” biographer DeAnne Blanton writes, “Where she lived, how she survived, her quality of life, and the date and place of her death are undetermined. She was born in anonymity, and so she died.”⁶⁴⁸ Hers is not a story to pass on. This project, however, works against this particular brand of imposed fungibility, embracing instead “a form of irresolution that pushes against forgetting by continuing to grieve, [as] continual grieving, or melancholia, can also be understood as necessary in the struggle against amnesia.”⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2005): 289.

⁶⁴⁷ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013): 160.

⁶⁴⁸ DeAnne Blanton, “Cathay Williams: Black Woman Soldier 1866-1868,” *Buffalo Soldier*, Originally Published 1992, <https://www.buffalosoldier.net/CathayWilliamsFemaleBuffaloSoldierWithDocuments.htm>.

⁶⁴⁹ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 167.

At the outset of this text, I questioned how best to write “the Black queer ancestor” back into existence and, on a less abstract level, back into historical memory. It can perhaps be argued that such a process begins with holding space for the ways these ancestors lived and died in the pursuit of more livable lives, free from both the bonds of enslavement and the violences of death-dealing, cisheteropatriarchal censure. Grieving figures like Cathay Williams requires grieving the ways she and countless Black women* like her strove to engage with themselves and each other in potentially queer ways, only to be sanctioned and ultimately erased for their efforts. In resisting this erasure, grief becomes “a practice of celebration,”⁶⁵⁰ reverence, and remembrance.

Tracing the afterlives of slavery means attending to the afterlives of the enslaved. How do those who we might claim as Black queer ancestors appear in our accounts of the past, and more to the point, how are they *disappeared* from them? In 2016, while walking along the Potomac River with his wife, Virginia state senator Richard Stuart “discovered that a two-mile stretch of erosion control along the riverfront farm he had just purchased was full of grave markers.”⁶⁵¹ Upon investigation, Stuart learned that the headstones were remnants of the once-prominent Columbian Harmony Cemetery in Washington, D.C., “a historic African American burial ground that was dug up and relocated in 1960 to make way for commercial development.”⁶⁵² Though many of the cemetery’s graves were

⁶⁵⁰ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 167.

⁶⁵¹ Gregory S. Schneider, “A Virginia State Senator Found Headstones on His Property. It Brought to Light a Historic Injustice in D.C.,” *The Washington Post* (October 26, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/headstones-black-cemetery-potomac-river/2020/10/25/3586f0d4-0d7a-11eb-8074-0e943a91bf08_story.html.

⁶⁵² Schneider, “A Virginia State Senator Found Headstones on His Property.”

moved to Prince George’s County, Maryland before work began on the metro station that now stands on the site, the unearthing of human remains and at least five coffins during construction signifies that not all of the buried bodies made this move. Further, the tombstones of those laid to rest at Columbian Harmony were “hailed off as scrap,” after which “several truckloads” were purchased by a former owner of Stuart’s farm in order to “build up his shoreline.”⁶⁵³

Among those originally interred in the now-defunct D.C. cemetery was formerly enslaved seamstress Elizabeth Keckley. As a final indignity following a life marked by forbidden intimacies, public rebuke, and private betrayal, Keckley was denied peace even in death. The cycles of exploitation and dismissal that shaped her experiences on Earth, both during and after her time in captivity, reproduce themselves in the conditions of her afterlife, as her headstone lies abandoned along a river or at the bottom of a landfill, and her body is plowed over and bisected by train tracks. Hers is not a story to pass on.

This project, however, offers an alternative, because memory is negotiable and “the struggle against amnesia”⁶⁵⁴ involves grappling not only with what is but also with what could have been. The interlocutors I’ve called on to speak to long-denied queer pasts cannot and should never be reduced to the violences they were made to endure, however numerous. Remembering them justly is to remember them fully—as figures who pondered, performed, and pushed the parameters of gender; sustained relationships with other women* as a practice of both survival and pleasure; and seized their own forms of

⁶⁵³ Schneider, “A Virginia State Senator Found Headstones on His Property.”

⁶⁵⁴ Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 167.

legitimacy in a society predicated on their exclusion. Mapping the literal and metaphorical boundaries these individuals crossed enables us to craft new narratives—queer narratives—because “crossings are never undertaken all at once, and never once and for all.”⁶⁵⁵ The afterlives, then, of women* like Ellen Craft, Harriet Tubman, Cathay Williams, “Stagecoach” Mary Fields, Minty Gurry Caden, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, Phillis Wheatley, and those who participated in the WPA Slave Narrative Project as a final act of naming consist of more than desecrated burial sites and a centuries-long process of misremembering. In the excavations I’ve staged here, these women* live on as precursors, as predecessors, as reminders that “playing outside of gender norms was part of the art of staying alive.”⁶⁵⁶ We conjure them, grieve them, and recount their narratives in spite and even *because* of the fact that we were never meant to.

This is not a story to pass on, but the dead do not like to be forgotten.

⁶⁵⁵ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 290.

⁶⁵⁶ Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley in discussion with the author, March 2021.

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