

CREATING A LIVING
HISTORIOGRAPHY: TRACING THE
OUTLINES OF PHILADELPHIA'S
ANTEBELLUM AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
AND MAPPING MEMORY ONTO THE BODY

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*I*n 1865 Sarah Gudger left her master's farm in North Carolina to begin life as a free black woman. "Aunt Sarah," as she was called locally, had seen fifty years of slavery and watched from her porch in Asheville as America transformed into an emancipated nation. In 1937, at what she claimed was the age of 121, Gudger recounted her slave experience for the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹ Her riveting narrative, in which the WPA transcriber attempts to capture her southern dialect in detailed phonetic spellings, is replete with descriptions of nightmarish conditions, cruel masters, violent lashings, and watching her mother be taken away. Gudger assures the interviewer, "Law, chile, nobuddy knows how mean da'kies wah treated."²

Sarah Gudger's WPA slave narrative, available online from the Library of Congress, is a part of the most concrete and widely accessible evidence attesting to black women's lives in America before Emancipation. However, while the WPA records and other

published slave narratives contribute a crucial part of American history, their compelling content and distinctively broken dialect can also serve to limit the modern American characterization of black women before 1863. In addition to these first-person accounts, persistent “Mammy” and “pickaninny” stereotypes that dominate popular culture’s engagement with the period reinforce the notion that before the end of the Civil War black women in America were one monolithic enslaved, uneducated, and passive group.

The reality is that black women, from colonial times through the early nineteenth century, found ways to make bold choices within the confines of their situations at a time when much of society questioned whether they had the intelligence to even understand their circumstances. There are few biographies of these courageous women because, in contrast to their male counterparts, their actions were often personal and their audience was usually private. Their choices were subtle, but their impact was substantial and sustained. For each Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth, there are hundreds of other women who actively pursued social change and remain undocumented because evidence of their contributions and sometimes even their existence has been lost, ignored, or, worse, purposefully erased. Scholars and artists must begin to piece together the scraps of evidence that remain in order to revitalize their stories and fully recognize the foundational ways in which black women have shaped the American experience from its very beginning.

The scholar and the artist often face similar dilemmas when conjuring the voices of the past—particularly when those voices have been deliberately erased or marginalized in traditional historical narratives. And yet both scholars and artists may also share a common goal: to allow those oppressed voices to speak again and to invite contemporary audiences—whether readers or spectators—to imagine the experiences and understand the lives of a long-silenced community. Recapturing the lives of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century African American women presents a particular challenge for both the historian and the theater artist. The traces that remain of their stories are often buried deep in records left by others. Scattered remnants and hints endure, tantalizing the modern researcher. John Ernest has described the process of reinscribing lost tales of African American history over familiar narratives as a kind of “performative historiography.”³

The medium of performance offers a unique means to access, embody, and recuperate these lost histories. My current project, titled *I Will Speak for Myself: Emancipating African American Women’s Lives from Before Slavery and Beyond*, works to unveil, document, and vivify long-forgotten early American

black women by blending historical research with performance in what I call a “living historiography.” This project began as a series of monologues titled *(Dis)Embodied Voices*, which were partially inspired by early American scholar Odaï Johnson’s continued examination of issues of evidentiary absence when pursuing historical reconstruction. Johnson explored a similar lacuna of evidence when reconstructing Colonial Williamsburg’s playhouse from nothing more than several postholes left in the dirt over two centuries ago. Johnson contends that the disappearance of a performance “is never utterly without a trace,” and that beginning from the smallest pieces of (im)material evidence, “a history does indeed seem acutely possible, acutely necessary.”⁴ Johnson’s challenge, to recover what is now absent, inspired the research and crafting of the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* characters as a way to envision the performance of a woman’s life based on the impressions left from her presence in history.⁵

If Johnson’s scholarship served as one impetus for *(Dis)Embodied Voices*, Philadelphia actress Kimberly S. Fairbanks served as the other. A gifted practitioner and generous collaborator, Fairbanks jumped at the opportunity to embody these forgotten women and became a partner in crafting each woman’s story through a rigorous investment in the facts of each woman’s life and a commitment to truthful depiction in every word, gesture, and moment. One of the most exciting aspects of developing *(Dis)Embodied Voices*’ living historiography was the rewarding interpersonal nature of blending scholarship and practice, both in rehearsal and on stage.

In developing the performance script, I focused on evidence of real women and, whenever possible, used their own words. On the whole, the project breathes life into slave narratives, personal letters, memoirs, diary entries, court records, poems, public addresses, and newspaper advertisements in order to share these women’s experiences, struggles, and journeys in their own voices. From a pool of many interesting possibilities, we narrowed the field to nine women of various ages who lived between 1649 and 1865 in states from Vermont to North Carolina. Their experiences ranged from tragic to passionate: for example, one monologue recreates the experiences of a seventeenth-century African American indentured servant pilloried for her “affair” with her white master.⁶ Another depicts the heartbreaking decision of a free woman of color to return to slavery in order to be with her slave husband.⁷ Each character is a case study of potentials and probabilities of what a black woman’s life might have been like in early America. Perhaps more important, this living historiography offers a roadmap for contemporary scholars to recover and reintegrate those lives and histories into our dominant narratives.

This article explores the research and development of *(Dis)Embodied Voices* through a close examination of the creation of three characters who lived in Philadelphia before 1863, “Abigail,” “Matilda,” and “Mrs. Mary E. Webb.” Developing these characters required meticulous research into social, educational, and economic circumstances in order to create a text that would both reflect the women’s historical situation and provide a compelling dramatic arc. Although the research and writing process for each monologue was relatively similar, each case posed its own unique issues of evidence, construction, and performance choices. One of the exciting challenges for this type of research, when the remaining absence is greater than the presence, is defining credible evidence that testifies to these women’s existence. Crafting tangible and credible identities for these insightful and, at times, incited women required striking a delicate balance between scholarly rigor and artistic license as I traced the outlines that remain to attest to the fuller lives of these women. Through my research for these monologues, what began as distant and disembodied voices became present and distinctive characters who allow modern audiences to directly engage with the social, cultural, religious, sexual, and gender constructs of early America.



FIGURE 1. Kimberly Fairbanks as “Abigail” in *(Dis)Embodied Voices*. Photograph by Valerie Joyce.

Abigail

“Abigail” is a former slave who has recently been manumitted by her French owner after they fled the island of St. Domingue (Haiti) during slave uprisings in 1791. Her monologue offers a glimpse into life after slavery during the years of the early republic, as Abigail’s creation was inspired by an entry that appeared on the list of the dead after the yellow fever epidemic that killed almost 5,000 Philadelphians in 1793.⁸ Abigail’s name was noteworthy because, unlike the thousands of other names from some of Philadelphia’s notable families, hers was followed by the simple description “a negress.”

In the overall development of this living historiography, Abigail represents the extreme example of creating a presence from absence, because there is literally no other information about her beyond the fact that she existed and the color of her skin. Without biographical evidence or a timeline for Abigail, the balance of artistic interpretation shifted to imagination. Therefore, supplementary evidence and careful crafting of a vocal and physical presence were required in order to accurately envision and fully embody Abigail’s post-slavery experience. Three carefully recorded aspects of late eighteenth-century life in Philadelphia proved useful in imagining Abigail’s daily existence; these were Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s published defense of the Free African Society, the empirical records of the yellow fever’s impact on the city, and Dr. Benjamin Rush’s meticulously detailed accounts of the fever’s course through the human body.⁹ Each of these sources established the historical milieu, creating a plausible context for Abigail and in turn informing the character’s given circumstances, the monologue’s textual content, and physical and vocal style choices for the actress.

By 1793 Abigail’s new home of Philadelphia had become the metropolis of North America. The city was both a thriving port controlling nearly one-quarter of the export trade of the United States and a complex urban center, housing both state and federal governments. Teeming with a cosmopolitan population of some 51,000, Philadelphia was home to Quakers and numerous other religious practitioners, statesmen, and recently transplanted members of French nobility who, like Abigail’s former master, had fled the revolt in St. Domingue.¹⁰ Also, as a result of Pennsylvania’s 1780 law mandating gradual emancipation, Philadelphia was the city with the largest free black population, 6,537 people, in the United States.¹¹ Incorporating these demographics grounded Abigail’s circumstances and her status in culture of the city.¹²

Many of Philadelphia's free blacks belonged to Reverend Richard Allen and Absalom Jones's Free African Society, a groundbreaking mutual aid founded in 1787 that fostered identity, leadership, and unity in the black community.¹³ In the monologue, Abigail is a dedicated member of Allen and Jones's Free African Society, playing an important part in their volunteer effort during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793.

When yellow fever seized the city in late summer of 1793, panic mounted and the citizens fled in droves. Estimates hold that 40 percent of the whites and 14 percent of all blacks left the city.¹⁴ One of the most important contexts of Abigail's monologue is the medical misinformation that prevailed during this period and kept many blacks in the city. Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of Philadelphia's leading physicians and citizens, promoted the notion that blacks were immune to the disease that caused the yellow fever and, relying on this assurance, many blacks stayed. Mayor Matthew Clarkson pleaded with Allen and Jones to mobilize the members of the Free African Society to nurse the sick and care for the dying and dead of the abandoned city.¹⁵

Richard Allen was a man who preached morality and discipline, noting for his followers that each was "a reflection of our entire race." In every situation, he counseled Philadelphia's free blacks to "let your conduct manifest your gratitude toward the compassionate masters who have set you free. And let no rancor or ill-will lodge in your breasts for any bad treatment you may have received from any. If you do, you transgress against God, who will not hold you guiltless."¹⁶ With his urging, hundreds of his followers volunteered during the hellish days after several weeks of yellow fever. Given this supplementary evidence, it seemed very possible that Abigail had also volunteered out of a sense of Christian charity to willingly do her part in aiding her fellow man suffering from yellow fever.

In the monologue, Abigail serves as one of Dr. Benjamin Rush's nurses. Dr. Rush and other physicians of the period kept thorough records of the stages and effects of yellow fever, which informed the content and context of Abigail's exchange with her patients. The first stage that Abigail would encounter usually lasted one to five days. According to firsthand accounts, during this phase the infected patient suffered chills, hot skin, pain in the head, back, and limbs, flushed face, inflamed eye, retching to vomit without producing anything, and constipation. The whites of the patient's eyes became tinged with yellow and there was constant puking of everything taken into the stomach, with much straining, accompanied with a hoarse hollow noise. It became clear that the patients were going to die from the

virus when they began to vomit something that looked like coffee grounds. This “black vomit” was sometimes accompanied by bleeding from the nose, tonsils, and gums. Finally, between the fifth and eighth days, the body would appear yellowish-purple and putrescent. The patient would be overcome with hiccups, agitations, deep and distressed sighing, comatose delirium, and finally death.¹⁷

Throughout the epidemic, Dr. Rush trained his nurses to give relief to hundreds of infected patients by bleeding therapy and by purging them through the ingestion of mercurial chloride as a laxative.¹⁸ In the play, Abigail has learned to bleed and purge patients and despite the nauseating results and her own personal anxieties about her children’s welfare, she feels compelled by her devotion to Reverend Allen’s teachings and by the responsibility of her new profession to persevere with her patient until dawn. The negotiation of these conflicting emotional forces creates Abigail’s central conflict.¹⁹

In developing all of the characters, two issues of dramatic construction became abundantly clear: first, each woman must be engaged in a central conflict that drives the action of her monologue and, second, each woman must exist in a moment of heightened tension, whether faced with a crisis or a catharsis, or on a crusade. Finding the specific moment where the stakes are highest for the character—that is also grounded in the historical context and fraught with conflict—became the most critical decision, along with how to make this moment immediate for the audience.

In order to set Abigail in a moment of heightened tension, the monologue occurs just before dawn in a private home, as her patient, the wealthy Mr. Taylor, struggles through a comatose delirium in the final stages of the infection. Abigail has been up for several nights and can leave her patient at dawn to go home to her children.

As the lights rise, an obviously exhausted Abigail struggles with the sheets, as if wrestling her delirious patient into submission in the bed.

Now I don’t want to have to get somebody to tie you down. Saw one poor soul break his neck last week jumping out a window when he was raging with one of these frightful fits. . . . Why are you fighting me? I know you are scared. I am too. But Dr. Rush is not here. He left *me* in charge. It’s just you and me tonight. The calomel will take its effects soon and I’m staying until the morning to see you through . . . one way or the other. (*The patient begins to relax*) I will be here with you Mr. Taylor . . . even though I been on duty for six nights now. No rest

for the weary, right? Well, I am certainly weary, but the Fever won't give up so I won't give up either.

The private bedroom setting in an empty city and the comatose condition of her patient allows Abigail a bit of freedom and familiarity. As each monologue developed beyond basic plot and dialogue, it became increasingly clear that language, dialect, and physical choices were the defining features that would not only distinguish each character, but would also allow the audience to fully engage with their personal experiences.

Actress Kimberly Fairbanks, playing Abigail, capitalized on this freedom physically as well, allowing her shoulders to slump as a result of the exhaustion and rhythmically rocking to comfort herself and her patient. As the character developed during rehearsals, Abigail's given circumstances also affected other performance choices; for example, in order to reflect her position as a recently freed slave from St. Domingue, Fairbanks employed a West Indian accent that gave texture and warmth to her lilting dialogue.

Much of Abigail's text is drawn from firsthand accounts of Philadelphia during the epidemic, including her vivid descriptions of trudging from Water Street through the empty and filthy streets to the chemists Goldthwait and Baldwin at the corner of Second and Walnut streets to get Dr. Rush's cure.²⁰ She describes choking on the haze of fires burning the contents of houses and clothes of the dead and hearing the jangle of bells as the graveyard cart dragged by fatigued horses draws down the street.²¹ Abigail's position as a member of the Free African Society also guided decisions for the text.

Abigail's stylized language is drawn from and inspired by *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's public rebuttal of publisher Mathew Carey's post-fever criticisms of the members of the Free African Society.²² Carey, a respected publisher and leading citizen of Philadelphia, had accused the blacks of exploiting the sick and abusing their desperate state during the epidemic. One specific story from Jones and Allen's refutation, offered in order to highlight the substantial and thankless work the Free African members did, became Abigail's personal experience. As she gazes out onto the empty street, she recalls:

Last week I watched as a man pushed a woman who was not yet dead out of his house. She staggered drunkenly and fell on her face in the gutter and was not able to turn herself. Thomas, the black man driving the cart, climbed down to prevent the woman from

suffocating. In taking her up he found her perfectly sober, but so far gone with the fever that she was not able to help herself. I still shudder to think of the look on her hard-hearted husband's face as he shut the door and left her to die in such a situation. She would be in Potter's Field now if Thomas had not gathered her up and taken her to Bush Hill where Dr. Rush bled her four times. She is recovering now. I hope she doesn't return to that husband of hers when she is fully well.²³

Here, Jones and Allen's specific experience of the epidemic helps to create Abigail's response to her environment, enabling the audience to envision the hardships the volunteers faced each day and the inhumanity that the epidemic provoked in its wake.

One of Carey's specific accusations was that the black nurses manipulated their patients by charging high rates for service. Jones and Allen refuted this accusation in their *Narrative*, asserting that many white patients preferred black nurses because of their alleged immunity.²⁴ At times bidding was erupted between ailing families over nursing care. Abigail shares a wry laugh with her comatose patient at the fervor that ensued:

You stole me right out from Mr. Cooper. Didn't you, sir? Said you'd pay me double the \$2 he offered me for house care. And me not askin' for anything more than a warm meal one night next winter. If I took all you was offering me I could be rich myself. But we follow the benevolent lead that Dr. Rush provides. He is seeing over 100 patients a day now. 57 died yesterday, 88 the day before that.²⁵

The venerable Dr. Rush was a part of the larger medical community that generated much of the misleading information. Rush was later accused of disseminating the false reports in an effort to keep the blacks in the city for assistance.²⁶

Whether the misinformation was purposeful or not, those free blacks who were urged to stay and help, as Abigail did, walked straight into peril because they believed in the cause and in their immunity. She explains to Taylor:

Reverend Allen says that nursing takes experience and the finer feelings of humanity. I don't have much of the first. Before last month I had never nursed more than my own babies' colds. But the Lord gives me strength. He removes all fear and sets my heart to be as useful as I can be.²⁷

It is this strong sense of duty, instigated by Reverend Allen's call, Dr. Rush's confidence in her, and her patient's dire circumstances, that raises the stakes of the central conflict for this character, for Abigail's mind is constantly drawn to her children, who are also ill.

Abigail's conflict becomes evident as she repeatedly confides in her patient, "You know, I have my own babies to worry about, too. When I left, my William had a chill and his head ached. But Dr. Rush assures me that we do not succumb to the disease and he will be fine." She is assuring herself more than the comatose Mr. Taylor and, as her spirits flag, her exhaustion seems noticeably like the first stages of the fever. As the monologue ends and the lights dim, the audience is left to imagine the inevitable fate that awaits Abigail, as Mathew Carey's published list of the dead is projected and her name appears as the first entry.

Left with only a name and the description "a negress" to testify to the entirety of a human life, I relied upon supplementary evidence and a good deal of artistic invention to create a credible and tangible presence for Abigail. Abigail's central conflict and her ultimate demise are conveyed through a text reconstructed from evidence of the period and serve as a counterpoint view of Dr. Benjamin Rush's life-altering work during the epidemic—work that both killed African Americans and enhanced their status as caregivers. Fairbanks's richly layered performance of the character illustrates the ways in which scholars and performers might craft living historiographies that establish and explore the complexities of life as a former slave in the capital city of the early republic. Utilizing Jones and Allen's text to create Abigail's detailed observations offers the audience both a specific understanding of the dire circumstances and a broader sense of the ways in which each Free African Society volunteer played a part in the city's recovery. Most important, Abigail's monologue works to remember, recuperate, and honor all of the Free African Society volunteers who risked their lives and whose generous sacrifice remains widely unacknowledged.

Matilda

The lights rise as "Matilda" strides confidently into the room and takes in her audience with a sweeping glance. It is 1828 and Matilda is a rabble-rousing educator, a grassroots agitator, and an early agent of nonviolent social change.

Her strong, clear voice rings out as she demands, “How can you, as mothers of daughters, not fight for the right to educate these young women?”

Developing the text for Matilda’s monologue was, in contrast to the other Philadelphia women, relatively simple because her words are drawn directly from an 1827 letter to the editors of the short-lived *Freedom’s Journal*.²⁸ The letter establishes the author as black, a woman, and educated, so setting became the most important choice in creating this character—somewhere a free black woman would have had access to the *Freedom’s Journal* and a passion for education activism. By 1827 Philadelphia’s black population was 97 percent free and, while the *Freedom’s Journal* was published in New York, editors Samuel E. Cornish and John Brown Russwurm had strong ties to Delaware and Philadelphia, making it certainly possible that Matilda could have read the newspaper while living in the city.²⁹

Matilda’s letter also coincided with a burgeoning revolution in Philadelphia that grounded her personal text in a specific cultural moment. As slave narratives and histories of the antebellum period note, formal education for African Americans in public and private settings developed slowly and unevenly before 1862 and, by the late 1820s, the black public, free and enslaved, varied widely in levels of literacy.³⁰ Historian Elizabeth McHenry, in her work *Forgotten Readers*, notes a cultural resistance to the black literacy movement, as education “posed a significant threat to . . . maintaining black subordination generally.”³¹ It is noteworthy, then, that nine African American literary societies cropped up in Philadelphia between 1828 and 1841.³² The all-male Reading Room Society, one of the first African American literary societies in the nation, was established in 1828 and the Female Literary Society followed shortly in 1831.

Matilda and the women of the Female Literary Society are some of the “Forgotten Readers” that McHenry asserts are from “a virtually unknown chapter in African American social and literary history” and they are the historical absence that this monologue works to address. One of the great challenges McHenry faced in learning about these female readers is that, in addition to the complete absence of records documenting their conversations or meeting agendas, the very act of reading is ephemeral and almost impossible to recapture. Some of the evidence that remains to guide the way to reconstructing these women’s reading activities is in their subsequent writings. McHenry notes that readers eventually used their literacy skills in writing “as a means of asserting identity, recording information, and communicating . . . their demands for full citizenship and equal participation in

the life of the republic.”³³ When Matilda’s letter to the *Freedom’s Journal* was aligned with the evidence of the Forgotten Readers, she became extracted from her anonymous beginnings and firmly rooted in Philadelphia, embodied as an education activist.

As her letter precedes the Female Literary Society’s investiture by several years, I envisioned Matilda as one of the women who were fully engaged at the beginning of the black literacy movement, calling for change long before the change actually occurred. In turn, I heard Matilda’s voice as more strident in person than it was in print, carried and lifted by the passion she feels for her subject. In order to dramatize Matilda’s text from the more passive modes of letter-writing or reading, I changed her imagined audience and raised the stakes of the moment at hand. Her letter’s intended audience was the educated black male editors of the *Freedom’s Journal* and the black readership of the first black paper, though the wider readership may have also consisted of white men and women. Given her status in this larger society, Matilda begins her provocative letter by respectfully asking for permission to speak: “Will you allow a female to offer a few remarks upon a subject that you must allow to be all important? I don’t know that in any of your papers, you have said sufficient upon the education of females.”³⁴ This deferential opening request allows readers to decide if they have any interest in her argument as she gently approaches her theme.

In performance, Matilda’s immediate setting became a gathering of a few dozen free black women in Philadelphia in 1828 who would be aware of, and probably have social or familial connections to, the recently formed men’s Reading Room Society. This more semiprivate setting gives Matilda a higher status than in the larger society of the print world and allows for a less conciliatory tone as she instigates her own educational revolution for her black female peers and particularly for their daughters.

Through this conceit, Matilda becomes “present” for the theater audience and, although almost none of the text is changed from her original letter, she is now able to pursue actively the higher stakes of her immediate goal: exhorting her audience of mothers to fight for the right to educate their daughters. These women’s indifference, inability, or lack of vision provides Matilda’s obstacle and she challenges them:

Do you, like so many others, think that our mathematical knowledge should be limited to “fathoming the dish-kettle,” and do you believe like so many generations before that we have acquired enough of

history if we know that our grandfather's father lived and died? 'Tis true the time has been when to darn a stocking and cook a pudding well was considered the end aim of a woman's being. But those were days of ignorance. . . . There are difficulties, and great difficulties in the way of our advancement; but that should only stir us to greater efforts.

Her fervent, elevated language marks Matilda as educated and her logical argument firmly rooted in emotion underscores her specifically female audience. Actress Kimberly Fairbanks employed a standard mid-Atlantic dialect for Matilda and employed a dynamic and energetically open physicality to both enthrall and spur her audience on to action.

Matilda recognizes literacy's potential for black women as a means of resisting subjugation. Her words are a window into thoughts many free black women must have had who were able to see education as crucially important in the fight for civil rights. She continues by asserting:

We possess not the advantages with those of our sex whose skins are not coloured like our own, but we can improve what little we have, and make our one talent produce two-fold. The influence that we have over the male sex demands, that our minds should be instructed and improved with the principles of education and religion, in order that this influence should be properly directed. Ignorant ourselves, how can we be expected to form the minds of our youth, and conduct them in the paths of knowledge?

Through the organized efforts of literary societies in Philadelphia, African Americans developed circulating libraries and engaged the free black public in self-education through surveys and academic lectures.³⁵ McHenry notes that this "invaluable method of acquiring knowledge" eventually turned reading rooms into a communal places to "experiment with rhetorical strategies" and engage in "a forum for debate on issues of racial and American identity."³⁶ Throughout the 1830s societies including the Library Company of Colored Persons (1833), the Minerva Literary Association (1834), and the Philadelphia Association for Moral and Mental Improvement of the People of Color (1835) took root and thrived in the city.³⁷

For their part, Matilda and the women of the Female Literary Society flourished in their first year. According to scholar Erica Armstrong Dunbar,

in 1831 the group had “approximately twenty members who congregated every Tuesday night for the purpose of ‘mental improvement.’”³⁸ Their actions were so remarkable that, in celebration of the society’s anniversary, abolitionist and newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison touted the group in *The Liberator*, asserting that “if the traducers of the Negro race could be acquainted with the moral worth, just refinement, and large intelligence of this association, their mouths would be hereafter dumb.”³⁹ These women were a part of a growing group of free, literate black women who, like Matilda in 1827, were now able to utilize writing in order to communicate, argue, assert, and demand recognition and full participation in their society.⁴⁰

With only the few lines in the *Freedom’s Journal* remaining to attest to Matilda’s personal convictions, this character represents the countless other African American women who valued education throughout the early nineteenth century. In order to galvanize the formation of the Female Literary Society, women like Matilda must have stood before groups of black women in this same manner; arguing for equality and their children’s future. She urges her fellow free women to imagine beyond the very basics of education in order to prepare for the day when they might be acknowledged as “capable, respected citizens.”⁴¹

We have minds that are capable and deserving of education and culture. And for ourselves and our daughters we must rise up and face the difficulties in the way of our advancement and fight for the future.

This letter endures as a piece of evidence testifying to educated and activist women’s existence throughout the country. The text is employed in the monologue to expand the understanding of free black women’s lives in the early nineteenth century and to imagine how the earliest advocates for black women’s education and equality rallied the women around them to join the reading revolution in order to prepare for the larger revolution yet to come.

Mrs. Mary E. Webb

During the increasingly tense years leading up to the Civil War, Mrs. Mary E. Webb of Philadelphia worked as an orator and actress, quickly becoming known as the “Black Siddons,” likened to the famous British actress of the period Sarah Siddons, for her skilled readings and performances. Mrs. Webb’s

talents inspired abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe to create a one-woman adaptation of Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "expressly" for her. This piece, *The Christian Slave*, was a clever marriage of patronage and promotional innovation that earned Stowe and Webb international recognition.⁴² After touring parts of America and performing for royalty in Europe from 1855 to 1856, Mrs. Webb died abruptly of consumption in 1859 at the age of thirty-one, leaving no diary or memoir to concretely establish the facts of her life.⁴³ In fact, her own thoughts or words are not recorded anywhere. All that remains to illuminate her story is a brief "Biographical Sketch" written by her husband, a few personal letters from Mrs. Stowe, and newspaper articles and reviews that followed her brief but controversial career.⁴⁴

Mr. Frank Webb, a Philadelphia novelist, developed his wife's "Biographical Sketch" as a part of the promotional events around *The Christian Slave*'s performance tour, offering details of Mrs. Webb's early life as the child of a runaway slave who was born free in Massachusetts in 1827.⁴⁵ The somewhat-biased personal nature of the piece caused speculation about her parentage and education, but most biographical accounts agree that she was of Spanish and African descent and that she was educated in a convent in Cuba. The facts of her biography solidify in 1845 when she married Frank Webb who, according to one biographer, "lived on the fringes of Philadelphia's black elite."⁴⁶ For a decade, the Webbs worked in "clothing-related trades" and participated in the city's black intellectual culture. Their financial circumstances changed for the worse in 1854 and Mrs. Webb sought employment by putting "her marked elocutionary powers to some practical account."⁴⁷ She had only modest success as a performer until the Webbs attracted the attention of Philadelphia abolitionist newspapers when Mr. Webb was denied passage on a ship for Rio de Janeiro because of his dark skin.⁴⁸ Mrs. Webb soon became a darling of the antislavery movement and her career gained momentum as she performed for audiences including Lucretia Mott, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Mrs. Stowe.

Although her biography is interesting to this point, a crucial detail is absent: Mrs. Webb's appearance. As noted above, newspapers consistently billed Mrs. Webb as the "Black Siddons," creating specific expectations for audiences and critics when they attended her performances. The descriptor "Black" is an important distinction because, by all accounts, Mrs. Webb was so light-skinned as to be mistaken for an "Anglo Saxon" who was "a deep brunette."⁴⁹ Even *Frederick Douglass' Paper* noted the title was "ill-advised" and this controversy persisted as a steadfast component of every newspaper blurb and advertisement for her performance career.⁵⁰ Eventually this controversy

became a public scandal in Boston that was followed in the newspapers along the East Coast. This incident shaped the content and context of the “Mrs. Mary E. Webb” monologue because it provides the setting and illuminates the character’s central conflict.⁵¹

Striking the balance between scholarly rigor and artistic license was in some ways most fluid in “Mrs. Mary E. Webb” because Stowe’s script is available and newspaper accounts provide enough pieces of the puzzle to allow the evidence to essentially speak for itself, creating dramatic dialogue that strove to be faithful to Mrs. Webb’s experience. In contrast to the other Philadelphia monologues, the complex setting of this piece layers both a public and private space, allowing the audience to observe the contrast in this character’s public and private behavior. During the monologue, Mrs. Webb is first in her private hotel room, where she is preparing to perform *The Christian Slave* for the first time, and then she later appears in a public performance space on tour in Europe.

As the lights rise, Mrs. Webb is distracted from her rehearsal by her frustration and rage after a confrontation with hypocritical Boston abolitionists who have invited her to perform as a part of an antislavery lecture series. The irony at the center of her frustration is that, although newspaper critics repeatedly state that her skin tone is too light to earn her the moniker “Black Siddons,” she has just been barred from taking meals at the hotel’s public table or praying with the Boston abolitionists because her skin is too dark. The central conflict for Mrs. Webb, now that she has experienced the abolitionists’ hypocrisy and fully understands her status in this society, is whether or not she can continue accepting Stowe’s patronage, knowing that she is simply part of a contrivance to sell novels.

In “Mrs. Mary E. Webb,” Mr. Frank Webb is theoretically present in the hotel room and provides Mrs. Webb with a sounding board for her conundrum. Due to their financial straits, she needs the money that Stowe and a professional career provide. Additionally, she very naturally craves the recognition for her artistic talents in a vehicle that is sure to bring acclaim. However, she also realizes that her mother risked her life so that she might be free and, ultimately, to work with hypocrites and be controlled by a white patron is too high a price for fame and security. In the privacy of her room, she bellows at her husband that these abolitionists are as *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* claims, “praying, preaching, psalm singing, black-hearted scoundrels, whitened sepulchers, fair without, but polluted within.”⁵² The private hotel setting exposes Mrs. Webb in a personal moment as she is caught in a frenzy of emotion and reason as she agonizes over whether or not to quit.

Mrs. Webb's monologue offers an example of the ways in which characters can be discerned through language and by artistic choices, as Fairbanks employed different dialects and physical presences throughout the piece to create three distinctive characters: Mrs. Webb and two of Stowe's characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Miss Ophelia and Topsy.

In writing Mrs. Webb's text, I used elevated language and a refined mid-Atlantic dialect to interweave her status as free born and financially secure in Massachusetts and to reflect her convent education in Cuba, as well as her oratory training. While she rages to her husband in her hotel room, her distinguished vocabulary and strident cadence combine to evoke her strongly independent-minded character voice, establishing the intimate nature of their familial relationship. As she struggles with her inner conflict, Mrs. Webb begins to read from Stowe's script that has been written "expressly" for her. She suddenly realizes that she has been bestowed this honor not for her acting skills, but because her appearance and her education allow her to believably play both black and white characters. The very same frustrating contradiction she faces each day, being neither "white" enough nor "black" enough, has brought her at once a rare opportunity and a painful choice. The interspersed passages of text from Stowe's rarely produced *The Christian Slave* highlight this paradox as she rehearses an exchange between the genteel southern mistress Miss Ophelia and the pickaninny character Topsy.

Ophelia: Now, Topsy, I'm going to show you just how my bed is to be made. I am very particular about my bed. You must learn exactly how to do it.

Topsy: Yes, ma'am.

Oph: Now, Topsy, look here; this is the hem of the sheet—this is the right side of the sheet, and this is the wrong; will you remember?

Top: Yes, ma'am.

[*Adroitly snatching a pair of gloves and a ribbon, and hiding them in her sleeve.*]

Oph: Now, Topsy, let's see you do this.

[*As TOPSY goes to make the bed, the ribbon hangs out of her sleeve.*]

Oph: [*Seizing it.*] What's this? You naughty, wicked child—you've been stealing this!

Top: Laws! How could it a got in my sleeve?

Oph.: Topsy, you naughty girl, don't you tell me a lie; you stole that ribbon.

Top.: Missis, I declar for 't, I did n't; never seed it till dis yer blessed minnit!

Oph.: Topsy, don't you know it's wicked to tell lies?

Top.: I never tells no lies; it's jist the truth I've been a tellin' now, and an't nothin' else.⁵³

Stowe's script dictates a drawl for white southern slave owner Miss Ophelia and a "pickaninny" dialect for slave girl Topsy. As Mrs. Webb performs in private, her anger and scorn seethe under the surface of derisive parodies of the required dialects. For this moment, Fairbanks also crafted nuances between Mrs. Webb's erect posture and Topsy's wayward childlike shuffling to emphasize their drastic differences in status, education, and physical well-being. Later in the monologue, when Mrs. Webb formally recites the same lines from Stowe's *The Christian Slave* as part of an eventual public performance, Fairbanks drew striking distinctions between the angry Mrs. Webb and the character Miss Ophelia by softening her voice to a sugary drawl as she coaxes Topsy into a confession. In this setting, Fairbanks made Mrs. Webb's tone refined and gracious even as she performs the "pickaninny" Topsy. The contrasting nature of public and private behavior within the "Mrs. Mary E. Webb" monologue effectively conveys the dichotomy between stereotype and reality by literally and figuratively forcing them into conversation with one another.

This dichotomy becomes heartrending at the climax as the formerly enraged, articulate, and opinionated Mrs. Webb performs a sadly palatable Topsy in public for the benefit of her patron, Stowe. The opportunity for audiences to read this reserved performance with the contextual knowledge of "The Black Siddons" conflict with the abolitionists vividly illustrates the ultimate goal of the entire project: to illuminate each woman's deeply layered experience in order to subvert the stereotypical expectations of the pre-twentieth-century black woman.

Conclusion

With only the traces that remain of Abigail, Matilda, and Mrs. Mary E. Webb's work in the world, the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* monologues and the larger *I Will Speak for Myself* project illustrate the ways in which historical research and performance might collaborate in a living historiography that strives to shape

a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the complexities of life after slavery, the fight for women's education and equality, and the abolitionist movement. By examining the facts and imagining the possibilities inherent in each of their social, cultural, religious, educational, regional, and economic realities, we can see an outline of the human who inhabited this space and time begin to emerge. By our tracing this outline and mapping these experiences onto the performer's body, these women's voices began to ring out loud and clear.

Together, the scholar and artist can actively engage history, filling these women with breath and life for the benefit of today's audiences. *I Will Speak for Myself* works to answer Johnson's call "to evoke the ghost of performance itself that has survived so incompletely, and to reassert that monumental and monumentally absent presence back into the civic . . . and cultural landscape" of America by shaping a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the complexities of these lives so that it is possible, as Johnson notes, that the "residue and traces may yet be made legible, may yet be read for the materiality that was, and the memory they yet contain."⁵⁴

The challenge remains, however, to examine more closely the circumstances and the evidence of African American women's lives, from colonial times through the early nineteenth century, and to inscribe new histories that embrace private and personal behavior that is just as substantial as the traditionally masculine narratives of transformative social change. Their stories are compelling because they are both universal and specific, and heroic in their inherent complexity that compels women to make difficult and frequently dangerous choices. We must continue to document and remember their stories by piecing together the scraps—the passing references in other works, the hastily scribbled day books, the meager evidence in newspapers—that can revitalize these women's stories in order to fully recognize the foundational ways in which black women have shaped the American experience from its very beginning.

NOTES

1. "Sarah Gudger," *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, available from the Library of Congress at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>. Without the benefit of birth records, many slaves were unable to document the year of their birth and in turn their exact age. The WPA interviewer begins Sarah Gudger's Slave Narrative by acknowledging that this interview was an "investigation of the almost incredible claim . . . that she was born September 15, 1816." The first three pages of the document provide corroborating statements from family and community members that validate Aunt Sarah's "claim" of being 121.

2. Ibid.
3. John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 9. “Attending to their fragmented stories can enable us to recover the essentially performative nature of the black historians’ collective project . . . a performative historiographical mode that supports the shifting performance of individual and collective African American identity necessitated by the containment of blackness within white nationalist history.”
4. Odai Johnson, “Working Up from Postholes: (Im)Material Witness, Evidence, and Narrativity in the Colonial American Theatre,” *Theatre Survey* 46, no. 2 (November 2005): 183–98.
5. *(Dis)Embodied Voices* was first produced in May 2012 at the Society of Early Americanists’ “Triumph in My Song” conference, which focused on the experiences of Africans in the Atlantic world before the Civil War.
6. “William Watts’s and Mary’s Case, 1649,” *Lower Norfolk County Order Book 1646–1650*, “William Watts and Mary (Mr Cornelius Lloyds negro Woman) are ordered each of them to doe penance by standing in a white sheete with a white Rodd in theire hands in the Chappell of Elizabeth River in the face of the Congregation on the next Sabbath day that the minister shall make penince service and the said Watts to pay the court charges,” quoted in *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606–1689*, ed. Warren M. Billings (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 161.
7. “Petition of Lucinda to Legislature of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Nov. 27, 1813, King George County, Library of Virginia, Richmond,” in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 106–17.
8. Philip Lapsansky, “‘Abigail, a Negress’: The Role and the Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Philadelphia: College of Physicians and the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1997), 68, and Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject, in Different Parts of the United States*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia, 1793).
9. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia, 1794). See also Lapsansky, “Abigail.”
10. Lapsansky, “Abigail,” 68, and Samuel A. Gum, “Philadelphia under Siege: The Yellow Fever of 1793,” *The Pennsylvania Center for the Book: Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (2010), 2, available at <http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/YellowFever.html>. For an analysis of how Jones and Allen defended Philadelphia blacks for accepting payments for nursing on the grounds that Carey, like other elite Philadelphians, encouraged citizens both to pursue wealth and engage in useful community service, see Thomas E. Will, “Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia’s Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen,” *Pennsylvania History* 69, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 558–76.
11. “Gradual Emancipation,” *Oxford African American Studies Center Online*, accessible at <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0004/e0254?hi=1&highlight=1&from=quick&pos=1>. See also Clayton Cramer, *Black Demographic Data* (New York: Greenwood, 1997).
12. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 276–78.

13. Jones and Allen, *Narrative*. See also Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30–31, and Lapsansky, “Abigail,” 69–70.
14. Lapsansky, “Abigail,” 64.
15. Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 8.
16. *Ibid.*, 27.
17. William Currie, *A Description of the Malignant, Infectious Fever Prevailing at Present in Philadelphia: With an Account of the Means to Prevent Infection, and the Remedies and Method of Treatment, Which Have Been Found Most Successful* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1793), available at <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/7468293?n=13&imageSize=1200&jp2Res=.5&printThumbnails=no>.
18. Gum, “Philadelphia under Siege,” 4.
19. In drama, conflicts are primarily resolved through interaction with another character who acts as the obstacle between the central character and their objective. As a one-woman piece, *(Dis)Embodied Voices* creates the other characters/obstacles through dialogue that reaches out to, interacts with, or responds to the central conflict.
20. William Cobbett, *Selections from Porcupine's Gazette* (London: Cobbett and Morgan, 1801), 7:233.
21. John Edgar Wideman's short story “Fever” in *Fever: Twelve Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1990) provides an evocative take on the actual experience of the street scenes during the epidemic.
22. Jones and Allen, *Narrative*.
23. *Ibid.*, 19.
24. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
25. *Ibid.*; Carey, *A Short Account*.
26. Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 3–57.
27. Jones and Allen, *Narrative*, 4, 12.
28. The “Letter to the Editors” was printed under the heading “An Anonymous Letter,” but is also signed, “MATILDA.” *New York Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.
29. “Freedom's Journal,” informational note from Accessible Archives online database, <http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/african-american-newspapers/freedoms-journal/#ixzz2EWcRq6yQ>.
30. Cora Lee Upshur-Ransome, *A Comparison of the African-American Presence in an Earlier and Later American History Textbook* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 18.
31. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 24.
32. Erica Armstrong Dunbar, “Writing for True Womanhood: African American Women's Writings and the Anti-Slavery Struggle,” in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 302.
33. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 24, 23.
34. *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.
35. Upshur-Ransome, *A Comparison*, 18. See also Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 115; and William Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 51–52.
36. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 23–24.

37. Dunbar, "Writing for True Womanhood," 301.
38. Ibid.
39. William Lloyd Garrison, "Address to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, on their First Anniversary, By a Member," *The Liberator*, October 13, 1832, 163.
40. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 23.
41. Ibid.
42. "Expressly" is part of the full title for the Stowe revision, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb* (1855). For more information on the text and tour, see the University of Virginia's Uncle Tom's Cabin Multimedia Online project "Christian Slave" page, accessible at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/uncletom/xianslav/xshp.html>. See also Ellen Letostak, "Surrogation and the [Re]Creation of Racial Vocalization: Mary E. Webb Performs *The Christian Slave*" (MA thesis, University of Georgia, 2004).
43. Eric Gardner, "Webb, Mary," *American National Biography Online* (April 2003), accessible at <http://www.anb.org/articles/18/18-03725.html>.
44. In recent years, three excellent articles have documented and analyzed aspects of Webb's performance tour: Susan F. Clark, "Solo Black Performance before the Civil War: Mrs. Stowe, Mrs. Webb, and *The Christian Slave*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 13 (November 1997): 339–48; Eric Gardner, "Stowe Takes the Stage: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Christian Slave*," *Legacy* 15 (1998): 78–84; Eric Gardner, "'A Nobler End': Mary Webb and the Victorian Platform," *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 29 (Spring 2002): 103–16.
45. F. J. Webb, "Biographical Sketch" (London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Co., 1856), accessible at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/uncletom/xianslav/xsesfjwat.html>. More is available on Frank Webb through Eric Gardner, "Webb, Frank J.," *American National Biography Online* (July 2002), accessible at <http://www.anb.org/articles/18/18-03725.html>.
46. Gardner, "Webb, Frank J.," 2002.
47. Webb, "Biographical Sketch."
48. "Disgraceful Conduct," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 5, 1855.
49. "The Black Siddons," *Provincial Freeman*, May 12, 1855.
50. *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, NY), May 11, 1855. The article is reprinted from the *Boston Courier*, May 5, 1855.
51. "The 'Black Siddons' and the White Abolitionists," *Boston Courier*, May 7, 1855.
52. "Practical Abolitionism," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 15, 1855.
53. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Christian Slave, A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb* (1855). Entire script accessible at <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/uncletom/xianslav/xshp.html>.
54. Johnson, "Working Up from Postholes," 184.