ON MAY 13, 1858, CHARLOTTE FORTEN of Philadelphia wrote in her journal: "Grandmother is quite unwell, so I was cook and housekeeper." This almost negligible entry provides fascinating insight into the expectations of the proper uses of time in this antebellum Afro-American household. That a twenty-one-year-old black woman should find cooking and housekeeping a unique activity, one to be remarked upon in her journal, suggests that the Forten household believed that this young woman should be spending most of her time as Charlotte was spending her time: studying French and German, writing poetry, taking long walks in the park, reading, and attending meetings where she would become more fully informed about public affairs—especially, but not exclusively, those public affairs that related to slavery and race.

Housekeeping might have been a mild annoyance, but by the time

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1 Journal of Charlotte L. Forten, May 13, 1858, Journal #2 (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University) (hereafter, Forten Journal).
young Charlotte was twenty years old, she knew much about more serious injustice—the oppression of race and the inequalities of judgment that resulted from gender discrimination. Hardly an outspoken or finely honed feminist, young Charlotte had, nevertheless, made several references in her diary to her disappointment with the lot of women as opposed to that of men. On one spring day in 1854, she made the following two notes in her diary:

I stood by for some time . . . [and] could not help envying a party of boys who were enjoying themselves in a sailing boat.

. . . one interesting little girl is severely reprimanded for wishing a carpet of flowers, . . . while a repulsive-looking boy receives much praise for a very long definition of the word "horse."\(^2\)

This second entry—an annoyed response to a passage she had just read in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*—was consistent with the disgust of the young Charlotte at military men, whom she found "cowardly and servile."\(^3\)

By contrast, Charlotte Forten placed fervent hope in the women she encountered, outspoken hope for recruits into the community of warriors for social justice. Young Charlotte was constantly feeding that hope by looking up, down, and sideways at the women she met. She looked up, with admiration, at white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, despite her assessment that Mrs. Child was "not as spiritual-looking as one would expect"\(^4\); and she judged William Lloyd Garrison's wife as "worthy of such a husband."\(^5\) Such a judgmental set of mind, seemingly single-minded in equating "worthiness" with social commitment, had developed in Charlotte Forten before the age of twenty, and it remained a part of her character. When Charlotte was past fifty, during a visit to black physician Caroline Still Anderson (herself an activist from the family noted for its leadership in the Philadelphia underground railroad), Charlotte expressed her pleasure in "the society of bright, interesting Dr. A and her kind husband." She also noted her approval of Dr. A's new associate, another "lady

\(^2\) Ibid., #1, May 24, 1854.
\(^3\) Ibid., #1, May 31, 1854.
\(^4\) Ibid., #2, Dec. 12, 1857.
\(^5\) Ibid., #1, May 31, 1854.
graduate of the Women’s Medical College, who [was] going to train nurses in connection with Rust University, Miss.” The possibility that talented women might not reach their full potential was a continuous concern to Forten, as is evident in the following journal note, written about Bessie, a fifteen-year-old acquaintance:

[Bessie] is very intelligent—and interesting, and will doubtless make a very superior woman. . . . [Bessie] exhibited an amount of taste, judgement and appreciation most remarkable in one so young. Besides, she seemed to be a truly earnest warm-hearted and independent girl—but—these are qualities too often dimmed and weakened by contact with the hollow . . . world. Yet I cannot but hope and believe that in her case it may not be so.

Written when Charlotte herself was barely twenty-one years old, this dispassionate dissection early on indicated Forten’s strongly judgmental nature which would continue throughout her life.

Charlotte Forten had only to look around the Philadelphia in which she was raised to find women—black and white—who had not been “dimmed and weakened by contact with the hollow . . . world.” Her own aunts’ vitality in the establishment and maintenance of a female antislavery society in the city, and the presence of internationally acclaimed singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, aggressive religious leaders Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, and Rebecca Jackson, and committed teachers and women’s rights advocates such as Sarah Mappes Douglass and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper—all meant that, for five decades, the landscape in Charlotte Forten’s round of meetings and activities was populated with several of the most forward-looking women of her day.

Young Charlotte Forten had been born in 1837 into a family alive with social concern. James Forten was the patriarch of this reform-minded, free black family. Born just before the Revolution, to free

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6 Ibid., #3, May 14, 1888.
7 Ibid., #2, Aug. 29, 1858.
parents, Charlotte's grandfather James Forten had grown up in the Philadelphia waterfront neighborhood at Lombard Street, and he had briefly attended the school for black children run by Anthony Benezet. In 1806, James Forten, by then a successful sailmaker, had purchased a spacious house at Third and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia, and there he and his wife Charlotte established what would be the family home for almost nine decades. This couple had eight children, four of them girls. Sarah, who was graced with her paternal grandmother's name, became an abolitionist poet. Harriet, Margaretta, and Mary Isabella were all teachers at various points in their lives, and Margaretta was a persistent advocate of women's rights. At his death in 1842, James Forten's home then passed to his widow, children, and grandchildren. Son Robert Bridges Forten, who had his father's household as the example of the appropriate upbringing for a young woman, was the father of the Charlotte Forten whose five diaries give us the clearest picture we have of the household which, at various intervals, sheltered all of these women.

Most of the attention given black women by American historians has focused on black women as tragic victims of racism rather than on black women as active participants in the building of a black community. Even the "new social history" has not made much progress in creating a more balanced picture of the diversity of participants and participation in the drama of Victorian America. All too often, as Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith point out, "All the women were white, all the blacks were men, but some of us were brave." What is still largely missing in our assessment of the black woman's story is the perspective of an ideological community, an investigation of the ways in which these women may have shared a cultural unity and some common goals, not only with each other,

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9 As of 1860, according to the U.S. census, the family home was occupied by forty-year-old Margaretta, twenty-six-year-old William, and Charlotte Forten (widow of James), then seventy-five years old. The insurance survey on the house (Mutual Assurance policy #713, Philadelphia Historical Commission) suggests a comfortable residence.


11 Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies (Old Westbury, 1982).
but with allies in other subcultures of antebellum American cities. Charlotte Forten was only one highly visible example of a certain type of black woman, but the availability of her papers and her story provide a sense of the lives, dreams, and ambitions of many of her compatriots. These dreams and ambitions, and the resultant life choices made by Forten and her compatriots, were shaped by the unique combination of race, gender, class, and education (formal and informal) which these women experienced in their youth. These experiences helped define a uniquely gender-specific life-course, a self-directed and race-conscious rational agenda which can reveal much about the participation of all Americans in the weaving and reweaving of a web of norms, perceptions, and perspectives.

Much of what Forten relates is not overtly "feminist"—the few journal comments about the injustice of gender are suggestive rather than definitive. Unlike Maria Stewart, the militant black feminist who excoriated black men as indiscriminately as she lambasted other oppressors, Forten's "feminism" was implicit in the pattern of her life, in the decisions she made, and in her choice of intimate companions. Such choices suggest the power of "role modeling" in shaping Forten's notions of what life-course would be possible and acceptable in her community. The social development and importance of what might be called "functional feminism" (a stance defined by an alternative life-style) as opposed to "rhetorical feminism" (ideas verbalized as well as—or even instead of—lived) is a path scholars are just beginning to travel. Historians have examined the family expectations of white women in antebellum America, and they have looked at black women's place in antebellum America. But free black women

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as a separate and self-conscious group are just beginning to receive
due notice.\textsuperscript{14}

Charlotte Forten—\textsuperscript{15} in the context of her community, of expectations
placed on the individual by her society, and of her imagination and
psychological bent—shed some light on the development of a black
“functional” feminism as it permeated one privileged urban family
and its friends. We have tended to see black women as devoid of
such a context. Having only recently discovered the “bonds of wom-
anhood” for nineteenth-century white women, historians might now
profitably explore the implications of such “bonds” for understanding
black women in that same society. In her investigation of the hidden
agenda of a group of white women “moral reformers” in New York
City, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has suggested the concept of an un-
derlying “emotional logic” that informed the reformers’ goal-setting,
concluding that the work of this group had the effect of altering—
albeit in a subtle way—the self-image of the group’s participants.\textsuperscript{15}
Such a perspective may be useful in attempting to review the workings
of the nineteenth-century black women’s community.

In 1953, when Charlotte Forten’s diary was introduced to a schol-
arly public, the editor suggested that blackness was the single most
important factor for understanding this young woman.\textsuperscript{16} This inter-
pretation of the diary’s significance was a first step into an arena of
scholarship that had little understanding of Afro-Americans as thinkers
and scant knowledge of the existence of black intellectual ferment.
Undoubtedly, race is of paramount importance in understanding For-
ten’s perspective on the world. But Charlotte Forten was not only
black; she was black \textit{and} female, nurtured in the overlapping contexts
of female kin, of an urban, middle-class household, of a female
network, and of a society self-consciously seeking to write its “rule
book” about what proper middle-class women should aspire to as well
as about what were the proper forms for race relations.\textsuperscript{17}

Janice Sumler Lewis has helped us document the family context

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Suzanne Lebsock, \textit{The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture
in a Southern Town, 1784-1860} (New York, 1984), especially 87-111.
\textsuperscript{15} Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, \textit{Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America} (New
\textsuperscript{17} Brown, “‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?’,” 10, 12, 14.
in which the Forten women lived. The kinship network was an intense
one: three generations of political and social activism—a family where
race-pride, temperance, tastefulness, moderation, and political fervor
fueled and were fueled by high energy on the part of all its members.\textsuperscript{18}
This public intensity was accompanied by a remarkable private am-
bience of luxury and grace, a setting lush with liberal learning and
"genteel" leisure-time pursuits, travel, and interaction with some of
the most progressive thinkers of the time.

Such a setting contrasted sharply with the life possibilities of most
nineteenth-century black women—indeed, of most nineteenth-cen-
tury women. Even outside the constrictions of the many women held
in bondage, most black women, including urban ones, had little access
to education or "leisure time." Fettered by race, gender, and, usually,
class, such women carved out a self by sheer strength of will (and,
often, the help of religion). For such women, "youth" was often
truncated by economic and reproductive pressures, and adulthood was
beset with relentless challenges to survival. One strong woman was
Jarena Lee, brave co-worker of religious giant Richard Allen, whose
story has recently been recaptured.\textsuperscript{19} Married young, summarily re-
located from the supportive community she had known in Philadel-
phia, then widowed and left alone with two infants, Jarena Lee found
sustenance in adopting the life of an itinerant minister—forsaking,
and finding relief from, the pleasures and challenges of penniless
single parenthood, and trading the pleasures and heartaches of a
private life for the rewards and strains of religious surrender. Lee’s
struggle for psychological survival—for herself, for her race, for her
gender (for she had to overcome Allen’s resistance to the idea of an
itinerant woman minister before she could take up her calling)—
took priority over her personal life. Women like Lee, whose lives
bespoke a feminism far beyond mere words, were much in evidence
in the world Charlotte Forten knew.

But the Forten women themselves were a sheltered lot, brought
to a feminine-equality stance not so much by adversity as by privilege.
Pampered and protected from the harsh realities of fending for them-
selves, they drank greedily from the Forten wells of privilege, always

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Esther M. Douty, \textit{Forten the Sailmaker} (Chicago, 1968).
\item \textsuperscript{19} Andrews, ed., \textit{Sisters of the Spirit}, 46.
\end{itemize}
assuaging the thirst with a clear sense of noblesse oblige. For the women as well as the men in this lucky family, education for economic survival was liberally seasoned with education for ideological leadership. Over the years between 1806 and 1892, into the Lombard Street home presided over by Forten patriarchs came “everybody” who was associated with progressive political, social, and educational reform: Roberts Vaux, the Reverend Samuel May, Lucretia Mott, William Lloyd Garrison, Richard Allen, Sarah Mappes Douglass, Maria Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, Samuel Cornish, Paul Cuffe, Charles Remond, Angelina Grimké, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Martineau, and more.20 Those who may not have arrived in person were present in the household through their printed works. Volumes by or about Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë, Margaret Fuller, Henry Ward Beecher, and Solomon Northup filled the hours which were available to a young Charlotte Forten who was freed from cooking and housekeeping.21 Nor was young Charlotte abandoned to study in isolation. One of her fondest fantasies—that there be someone to read to her while she sewed so that the drudgery of needlework would be accompanied by something useful—was, on many occasions, satisfied by her aunt Harriet and her aunt Margaretta, who not only shared Charlotte’s interest in literature, but who also accompanied her to art exhibitions and public lectures.22 Through such contacts and experiences did the Forten women distill their ideas of important touchstones in the life of humankind. In 1859, Charlotte recorded a contemporary event in the ongoing struggle for racial justice, comparing it to a similarly dramatic event which occurred when Charlotte was no older than one year of age. The diary context indicates that this earlier event was a well-known landmark in the historical landscape of the reformer community in which Forten moved. The earlier tragedy—a violent mob’s destruction of Pennsylvania Hall, in 1838—occurred during a double convention which her aunts had helped to organize of

20 Douty, Forten the Sailmaker, 168-70; Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (New York, 1969), contains further discussion of the Fortens’ contacts with other nineteenth-century reformers.
22 Forten Journal, #1, June 28, 1854.
abolitionists and women’s rights advocates.23 No doubt, young Char-lotte, whose mother was dead before the daughter was three years old, was deeply influenced by the ideas of militant feminism espoused by her aunts—especially her aunt Margaretta.

Steeped as they were in an activist family life, each of James Forten’s daughters carved a special niche in the reform crusade of their day. An active organizer of the 1830s national convention of black women, Sarah Forten had her poems published in the abolitionist press. Margaretta divided her time between operating a school for black children and a secretaryship of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, of which she and two of her sisters were founding members, along with Quaker activists Lucretia Mott and the Grimké sisters. Harriet, who married Robert Purvis, a wealthy mixed-race friend of her father, joined her activist husband in his participation in the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society despite the Society’s restrictions on black and female membership. And this Forten-Purvis family refused to pay its taxes when their children were barred from segregated public schools.24

Much of what we know of the Forten family’s doings comes from the journal of Charlotte Forten, and most especially from her first diary, written when she was a very young woman. The use of the written word—journal, letters, pamphlets—to examine, monitor, and chronicle the quality and growth of one’s life was a common device among Victorian intellectual women. The Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott—all well-known in the Forten household—were only two of many examples of young white women, in mid-century intellectual families, who by being sheltered were allowed to prolong, magnify, and recount their girlhood, and thereby maximize their intellectual and spiritual potential.25 Inherent in this focus was the assumption that life has a “higher purpose” than simply procreation—a higher purpose for which prolonged preparation was necessary. Moreover, the very concept of such preparation time presupposed a family with the resources to provide economic, emotional, and social protection.

23 Ibid., #2, April 8, 1859.
24 Quarles, Black Abolitionists, 12.
through such an extended youth. Such a setting was one which James Forten was able to establish for his heirs, a setting in which education for public service took a centrality at least equal to the place of education for economic survival.26

In these as well as other aspects of life, the Forten family no doubt took some of its cues from “mainstream” middle-class society—from what white urbanites were defining as the “good life.” Music, classical literature, gracious but tastefully modest entertaining, and liberal travel extended the horizons of all the Fortens, making their visibly urbane sophistication a source of interest, curiosity, and sometimes resentment to their neighbors. In fact, this family’s adherence to the tenets of white middle-class “respectability” caused some of their white neighbors to fear that patriarch James Forten’s goal was to marry his daughters into the white middle class. This and other resentments at the Fortens’ successes probably also prompted anti-black rioters to focus some of their venom specifically on this family.27

Whether Forten’s critics were correct in their ideas about the family’s goals is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the Fortens seemed to have some consistent plan—articulated or implicit—of what was appropriate training for the “modern” woman. In the fall of 1856, when the then eighteen-year-old Charlotte was living and studying with the Remond family in Massachusetts (the black abolitionist Remonds were long-time friends of the Fortens), Charlotte requested and received her father’s permission to remain in Salem and continue her studies beyond the appointed tenure. Her journal entry reflected both her elation and her sense of what her father would expect in order that he “never have cause to regret . . . [his] kindness.” She promised herself that she would “spare no effort to become what he desired that I should be; to prepare myself for the responsible duties

26 A representative discussion of the purpose of education and the inculcation of values in early American families is to be found in John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970), 144-50.
of a teacher, and to live for the good that I can do my oppressed and suffering fellow-creatures.\textsuperscript{28}

In thus accepting responsibility for the oppressed fellow creatures, women developed a strong working relationship, especially between urban black reformers and urban radical white Quaker women. For young Forten, Lucretia Mott, the Grimké sisters, Sarah Douglass, and Harriet Purvis were only the most visible elements of a synergistic web of feminine activism that stretched across the western world. But what of the background and family expectations of the women who formed this alliance? Black women—even middle-class ones—were expected to be active in the public sphere: the luxury of a sheltered “domestic sphere” was morally unattainable for them even when it was economically possible. Hence, the fact that all of James Forten’s daughters were active in the world outside the home suggests that the Forten men at least accepted such a role for women, if indeed they did not actively support it. As long as they observed certain rules of modesty and decorum, middle-class black women who made a life outside the home were often praised and revered rather than condemned, pitied, or ostracized.\textsuperscript{29}

Such an expectation made for a natural cultural alliance with Quaker women, whose family values also permitted and encouraged the engagement of public “witness.” By the mid-nineteenth century, Quaker tradition had come, however lurchingly, to define women as possessing equality of soul and of intellect. Quaker families often encouraged their women in the fullest development of both, and, if the Meeting community gave its approval, it was not unusual for Quaker wives to leave home and children to travel for weeks or months in itinerant ministry service.\textsuperscript{30} In the climate of growing feminism, the political and philosophical alliance between certain Quaker women and their black urban middle-class allies was buttressed by certain cultural similarities with respect to the role of women in public and private life, similarities which they had in common with

\textsuperscript{28} The entry for May 24, 1854, is one of many such entries. On the Salem connection, see Gloria C. Oden, “The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten: The Salem-Philadelphia Years (1851-1862) Reexamined,”\textit{ Essex Institute Historical Collections} 119 (1983), 119-36.

\textsuperscript{29} Forten Journal, #1, Oct. 23, 1856.

each other, but which set both apart from the mainstream of middle-
class family life, where women’s roles were increasingly restricted and
intellectual pursuit severely circumscribed.

Apparently, however, a life of commitment to social reform did not excuse these women from the responsibility of managing a proper home. Extended families, domestic help (usually acquired in exchange for room and board),\(^{31}\) and whatever other resources could be called upon were employed to give these young Forten women a reputation for gracious entertaining. Charlotte’s aunt Harriet, who had at her disposal the substantial resources of her husband’s spacious farm, prize horses, and stylish carriage, had the most notable reputation for gentility, but her sisters were also included in John Greenleaf Whittier’s 1833 poem praising the social grace of “the Daughters of James Forten.”\(^{32}\) Whittier, a frequent visitor to both the Forten and Purvis homes, was a special mentor to the Forten women over two generations, encouraging their writing and aiding them in getting their work published. Himself of Quaker background, Whittier was probably unperturbed by the specter of independent women.

And independent these women were. Unfettered by significant economic restrictions, young Charlotte could spend months in the Remonds’ home, availing herself of the integrated public schools, and studying botany, mathematics, Latin, French, German, art, and poetry while listening to her friend and schoolmate play her piano in the background. In addition, Charlotte regularly read the abolitionist newspapers and punctuated each day with a long stroll in the woods, where “... in perfect silence [she could] ... commune with Nature and with Nature’s God.”\(^{33}\) This independence did not exempt young Charlotte from the influence and watchful eye of the women who felt responsible for her development. Her aunt Harriet visited her often, and her aunt Margaretta occasionally. When all else failed, Charlotte had at her disposal the letters of her deceased mother, letters saved out of respect for her history as well as love of family. As Charlotte observed:

> Looked over some very old letters written by my dear, lost mother—

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\(^{32}\) Douty, Forten the Sailmaker, 171.

\(^{33}\) Forten Journal, #1, May 27, 1854.
years ago. As I read the words penned by that dear hand, a strange feeling of tenderness, of sadness, of loneliness came over me, and I could not refrain from tears. Dear, dear mother, whom I have scarcely known, yet so warmly loved—who art now an angel in heaven—my heart yearns for thee!\footnote{Ibid., \#2, July 16, 1858.}

On the following day, this “yearning” had not yet dissipated, nor had the inclination to internalize the ideas of this long-departed woman:

"Last night I lay awake thinking of my mother’s letters—what a fine and noble character they reveal. She must indeed have been just such a being as I have always fondly imagined."\footnote{Ibid., \#2, July 17, 1858.}

Such intensity of feeling about the women in her life was not reserved for her dead mother alone. Charlotte maintained a continuously intimate friendship with her aunt Harriet, including such things as providing the distractions of whist and chess and Lydia Maria Child’s poetry during an illness suffered by this aunt. During Charlotte’s frequent visits to her aunt Harriet’s Byberry farm, the aunt, in turn, would read aloud while Charlotte did needlework. Similarly, Margaretta Forten remained closely involved with her niece. They studied French together; Charlotte taught for a time in her aunt’s school; and during Charlotte’s tour of service to newly freed slaves in South Carolina during the Civil War, Margaretta was a constant correspondent.\footnote{For example, see ibid., \#2, April 5, 12, 14, 1858, and Feb. 17, 1863.} Wherever she was living, Charlotte maintained both face-to-face and epistolary communication with at least a dozen women, all activists “worthy” of her respect. At least several times each week, Forten’s journal reports such activities as “walking through the fair arm-in-arm with Mrs. Chapman” or stopping at the home of Mrs. Putnam or other female friends to discuss books or abolitionism.\footnote{Ibid., \#2, May 31, 1854.} These female contacts were almost entirely limited to women who were standard-bearers in the fight for social justice. Charlotte’s “social” life thus was but a careful extension of her ideological life. And this ideological life was deeply focused on romantic
philanthropy. The remains of a pressed flower—still extant in the manuscript journal—attest to the romanticism. The following journal entry, written in reaction to a perusal of a book of engravings of American authors' homes, bespeaks Forten's drive for service:

I thought it would be delightful to live there, with a few dear friends, far from the busy world; and yet to do much good in the world, and make others better and happier, and be known by that good alone.\(^38\)

Such single-minded devotion to a cause often made it difficult for Charlotte to enjoy the ordinary pleasures of life, for the guilt associated with being a woman of privilege in a world where most of her black sisters suffered sometimes interfered even with Charlotte's ability to feel undiluted joy. Her June 1, 1854, journal entry after attending a friend's wedding is one of many examples: "... we could enjoy ourselves [only] as much as possible in these exciting times. It is impossible to be happy now."\(^39\) The highly charged trial of escaped slave Anthony Burns seemed to have made it "impossible," indeed unconscionable, to subordinate public concern to private pleasure, even for a brief celebration.

Only in service was self-fulfillment allowable. In her letters home from her teaching service to southern freedmen—letters comparable in style and content to the letters of many of the white women philanthropists recruited by northern missionaries to help educate the ex-slaves—Charlotte Forten revealed something of the exhilaration of the experience. Echoing through the letters are her excitement about her students, her sense of purpose, and the camaraderie among missionaries. The letters also ring with Forten's enjoyment of a situation where a mere woman might be accorded a bit of deference, as well as some modicum of authority:

I have never felt the least fear since I have been here. Though not particularly brave at home, it seems I cannot know fear here.\(^40\)

\(^{38}\) Ibid., #2, Oct. 23, 1856.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., #2, June 1, 1854. Though the journal does not specify, this case must have been the trial of Anthony Burns, who became a cause celebre for the abolitionist movement in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. See Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 207.

\(^{40}\) Entry for Wednesday, March 4, 1864, quoted in Billington, ed., *Journal of Charlotte L. Forten*, 191.
In these same letters, Charlotte Forten also revealed some of her ability to distinguish between idealism and racial realities:

I like Mr. T. [a white colleague]. Report says that he more than likes me. But I know it is not so. Although he is very good and liberal he is still an American, and w'd of course never be so insane as to love one of the proscribed race. The rumor—like so many others, is entirely absurd and without the shadow of a foundation.41

The reconstructed South provided an arena for women's leadership at an intensity never before experienced by American women. Whereas men's service had always been encouraged in the broadest sphere, the aftermath of the Civil War opened out new opportunities to women whose public contributions had before been, at best, undervalued, or worse, barely tolerated or rejected.42 Black women were not the only ones to discover their power in the setting of postwar service. The exhilaration evident in Forten's letters (an exhilaration heavily laced with northern snobbery) was equally evident in the messages sent home by northern white women volunteers. Exuding excitement at feeling healthy, needed, and in control of the opportunity to be active, Huldah Anna Kidder, for example, wrote to her family in New England:

We've closed up another month of school. My average was 75. I have had my ABC's and part of my primers & first readers taken out so I have a smaller school. One of our teachers has had orders today to report to Harper's Ferry so I'm afraid I shall have only a few days of rest. My school now numbers 70. Last month it was 128. I had to work some, but it agrees with me in body and mind. . . . 43

I have no wish to change my place, only when I hear of the hard times some of the teachers have had I feel as though with my health and strength I ought to help in a new field.44

Forten and her "functional feminist" contemporaries thrived on such opportunities to exercise their minds and challenge their spirits.

41 Sterling, ed., We Are Your Sisters, 283.
42 Brown, "'Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?,'" 2-3; Horton, "Freedom's Yoke," 57.
44 Ibid., 38.
Kidder never married, moved about from Virginia to North Carolina, to Florida, and, finally, to Japan where she established a mission school for girls. Forten spent more than a year in South Carolina, then returned to Philadelphia where she lived and worked among women until her marriage to Francis Grimké in 1878—when she was forty years old.45

The Forten women’s consistent response to injustice in their world was to confront it, bringing to bear all their not inconsiderable resources of wealth, intellect, education, high energy, charm, social contacts, and hard work. Yet even these were insufficient to satisfy the relentless demands these women placed upon themselves. Charlotte’s journal is liberally seasoned with expressions of guilt that she was not doing more. She measured herself with a stick no less rigid than that by which she measured others, and this highly disciplined woman frequently flagellated herself for her lapses of discipline. Every morsel of time, in the tradition of Christian stewardship, was used to its fullest in the service of humankind. During her several years of study in Salem, Massachusetts, young Charlotte Forten had applied herself dutifully to her studies. Yet, it was a disappointed young woman who contemplated her twenty-first birthday:

a want of energy, perseverance and application . . . and here I am, nearly twenty-one, and only a wasted life to look back upon.46

Forten—who regularly read Harper’s and the antislavery press, who had mastered some botany, French, Latin, art history, English, and American literature—felt in danger of being a failure at twenty-one. When her birthday finally arrived, she repeated her disappointment at how little she knew that would be “good and useful.”47 Ideas and service were the higher good; personal relationships were desirable insofar as they supported these two higher goals. Throughout her life, Charlotte Forten was driven to perform, to serve, to do. Though sometimes she retreated into tension headaches and other physical ailments, her journal reflects her continued belief that she ought to be doing more.

46 Forten Journal, #2, June 15, 1858.
47 Ibid., #2, July 17, 1858.
Forten had a mission, a dream of how to make her own individual life count toward the advancement of the group. In this she did not stand alone. All the Forten women shared her convictions, in varying degrees; so, too, did such other contemporary black women as Sarah Douglass, Fanny Jackson Coppin (a former slave who became principal of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia), and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (organizer of Sunday school, temperance, and educational groups for black youth). Such women did not always articulate this vision, but their willingness to travel alone, to subject themselves to the curiosity and ridicule of public audiences, to eschew needlework and housework in favor of taking their self-image from something "useful," to postpone or forgo marriage and children, to seek the exposure of publication, to openly (if modestly) state their resentment at men's superior privilege—all form the contours of a "functional feminism." The Fortens and the other "privileged" black middle-class women who defined themselves by becoming (to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on the man of thought as a man of action) women of thought and action were not isolated phenomena; rather, they were threads of a pattern, conceived in a vision and executed in intertwined missions. Though their overarching mission of black women's advancement sometimes resulted in shortsightedness, misjudgment, or downright snobbery, these activist women deserve respect for setting aside some of the norms of "ordinary" life in order to pursue a high-minded goal. Abstemious personal lives, publishing, organizing, performing, and teaching—these were the patterns such women adopted to move toward their goal. Related to, but independent from, the strategies of white women, who had only to fight the battle of gender, these black women chose the stimulation of pursuing a dual mission, accepting a much-restricted private life-course, in pursuit of public betterment of race and gender.

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