

RACE, WORK, AND DESIRE
IN
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MICHELE BIRNBAUM



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CHAPTER I

*Dressing down the First Lady: Elizabeth Keckley's
Behind The Scenes, Or Thirty Years A Slave And
Four Years In The White House*

Lizabeth, you are my best and kindest friend, and I love you as my best friend.

Mary Todd Lincoln to Keckley, *Behind The Scenes*¹

My association with Mrs. Lincoln . . . clothed me with romantic interest.

Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind The Scenes*

“I have been her confidante, and if evil charges are laid at her door, they also must be laid at mine. To defend myself, I must defend the lady that I have served. The world have judged Mrs. Lincoln . . . and through her have partially judged me, and the only way to convince them that wrong was not meditated is to explain the motives that actuated us” (xiv). With her remarkable, brief invocation of “us” in the Preface to *Behind The Scenes* (1868), seamstress Elizabeth Keckley (1824–1907) unites her reputation with that of the President’s wife in order to stage their narrative separation. More interested in defending her own honor rather than her “imprudent” (xiii) lady’s, Keckley must at once claim identification with Mary Todd Lincoln to establish her prestigious place in the White House-hold as modiste and intimate, yet distance herself from the widow’s fall from social grace. When Mrs. Lincoln sold her presidential finery and clothes in 1867 in order to pay off her notorious debt of \$70,000 to seamstresses, milliners, and shopkeepers, Keckley – as her dressmaker – risked appearing vicariously responsible for the scandal. Readers of Keckley’s exposé, it turned out, did not hold her responsible for her patron’s weaknesses; nevertheless, her narrative had a unanimously hostile reception on all political sides. Attempting to explain why both erstwhile abolitionists and secessionists alike condemned her, James Olney has limned the complex rhetorical angling involved in “writing within, and simultaneously against”² the literary tradition of Southern apologetics in the postbellum era. William Andrews and Frances Smith Foster persuasively situate *Behind The Scenes*, particularly the first third of

the work that recounts her enslavement by the Burwells in Virginia and then by the Garlands, in the tradition of the slave narrative, and to some extent explain her rise and fall as a function of generic constraint.³

Yet, given Keckley's tempered representation of slavery, the public anger suggests *Behind The Scenes* was provocative not simply for discussing her "thirty years a slave" but for exposing the last "four." The genre of the exposé engages the realist impulse to uncover truths, implicitly enjoining criteria of authority and validity; the attacks on Keckley's claim to represent what "really" happened engage these criteria, suggesting what she breached is not literary form but the shape of social reality. The *National News* in New York, for instance, quickly published a coarse parody entitled *Behind the Seams: By A Nigger Woman Who Took in Work From Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis*, with a preface signed with an x (her mark) by "Betsy Kickley."⁴ In its insistence that the "mulatto" author's close relationship with these famous women warrants her no more than an epithet, that her employment as seamstress deserves no name beyond ad hoc "work" "took in," the dismissive title betrays a frustrated recognition of the latent power of "nigger" women. Similarly, the *National News* and the other condemnatory reviews of Keckley's account focus less on her accounts of mistreatment as a slave and almost exclusively on her revelations about the Jefferson Davis and Lincoln families, in whose service she was serially employed after moving from St. Louis to Washington D.C. in 1860.

Clearly, many felt Keckley had "taken in" those whose work she had taken up, and which by its nature had allowed her into the inner sanctum of their households. The *New York Citizen* charge is representative, accusing Keckley of being "grossly and shamelessly indecent," and the book "an offence of the same grade as the opening of other people's letters, the listening at keyholes, or the mean espionage which unearths family secrets with a view to blackmailing the unfortunate victims."⁵ The book's publisher, G. W. Carleton, finally recalled *Behind The Scenes* under pressure by Robert Lincoln, the Lincolns' oldest son. As the *Citizen's* pique suggests, indignation at (and fear of) what was perceived as Keckley's near-criminal indiscretions is tied most specifically to her betrayal as a trusted employee, for clearly the writer of the article had in mind a grade of offenses associated with domestic servants, those putatively most in a position to open letters, peer through keyholes, or unearth family secrets – were they to bother. Keckley's apostasy lay not simply in pointing to white precedents of exposé, although she insists that "[i]f these ladies [in the Washington circle] could say everything bad of the wife of the President, why should I not be permitted to lay her secret history bare" (xv). Nor was the furore simply over

violations of caste, over “a slave girl who has forgotten her place . . . [and trespassed] across the racially defined social, class, and behavioral barrier that legalized slavery had reinforced.”⁶

Keckley, after all, had purchased herself in 1855; she was no longer a slave when employed by Mrs. Davis or Lincoln. Her relatively novel status before national emancipation as self-employed ex-slave becomes a crisis, apparently, only after the War. The book’s publication – and with that, Keckley’s capitalization on her past employment for her own ends – marks a shift from enslaved to “free” labor, from commodity to producer. The supposedly simple prepositional character of what are, in fact, profound transitions (“from” enslaved and “to” wage laborer) does not occur at the moment Keckley buys herself in 1855 but rather when, in 1868, she writes a book for others to buy. That is, her move from object to agent does not occur by *fiat* at the moment of her purchase with borrowed funds, nor even when she pays back her white sponsors years later. And the exercise of her sovereignty is not damned simply because she is somehow a “free agent,” “master” of oneself, as Frederick Douglass puts it in *Narrative of the Life* (1845) when he purchases himself. Indeed, the supposedly radical language of self-possession appears less provocative when one considers that the right to possess “selves” made slavery possible – one reason why Harriet Jacobs, if not Douglass and Keckley, rejects the transaction altogether when, in *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861), her Northern benefactor first offers to buy her freedom. Rather, the problem for reviewers appears less Keckley’s position as her own person, editorial peer, and “white observer” (Foster, *Written By Herself*, 121) than that this “self-reliance” (Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 20)⁷ interrupts the social and economic reliance between black and white women institutionalized by slavery before, and now threatened by, the War’s aftermath. Keckley’s *Behind The Scenes* is seen as victimizing her employers not because she is acting as an independent but because she tries to profit from white dependency on black “help.” In that sense Keckley’s narrative is less a refusal of the continued commodification of her body and labor after emancipation as an attempt to make *white people’s lives* the desirable commodity to be circulated and sold in this new free market.

FICKLE DAMES AND ANGRY SERVANTS

Keckley can lay claim to her employers’ lives in part through the imbricated rhetorics of family and work imported from slavery to a postwar domestic service industry. If Southerners had long invoked domestic metaphors to

sanction slavery (master as *pater*, mistress as mother, slaves as extended family – children, “uncles” or “mammies”), similar terms of obligation and affiliation underwrote postbellum domestic service. As Mary Todd Lincoln’s biographers confirm, and Keckley makes clear in her Preface, she was one of Mrs. Lincoln’s best friends, her “confidante,” and “intimately associated with that lady in the most eventful periods of her life” (xiv).⁸ Yet Keckley also insists that she is certainly not the “special champion of the widow of our lamented President” (xv), that Mrs. Lincoln is a woman of “jealous freaks” (124) and “the most peculiarly constituted woman” (182) she has ever met. By the end of the narrative, financially ruined by Mrs. Lincoln’s broken promises of support and the widow’s depleted means after her husband’s death, Keckley complains that “fortune, fickle dame, has not smiled upon me” (330). No dame is more fickle in Keckley’s narrative than Mrs. Lincoln, but Keckley insists the book was “not written in the spirit of ‘the angry negro servant.’”⁹ Her defense, however, no doubt incited critics’ worst fears, for her comments imply there already exists a type (suggested by the quotation marks bracketing “the angry negro servant”) and a genre (“written in the spirit” of that type) which she confirms through her very disavowal. In fact, Keckley herself is one of the first writers, if not the inaugural one, in the tradition to which she refers – a tradition of “negro” servants writing (“angrily” or not), a tradition of “servant narratives” emerging from the slave narrative.¹⁰

Coined “women’s work,” domestic service is most typically and specifically a “female-female relationship,”¹¹ and the most common arrangement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between white women and those of another class and race. With the standardization of domestic service (which included cooking, housekeeping, sewing, governess duties, and sometimes wet-nursing) in the 1850s came the rise of “housewives’ manuals, training schools for domestics, and regular articles on the subject in popular magazines” (Rollins, *Between Women*, 53). As a mode of control, formal instruction of both employers and employees preserved social distance in the face of emancipation and black, Irish, and German migration in the North; but, though in the South the racial composition of the servant class changed little until World War I, free-wage labor posed a threat to the antebellum character of service relations in both regions (51). Both acceding to and exploiting this anxiety in an effort to advance his platform for economic uplift, Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Normal Institute, which emphasized the industrial arts – including, for women, nursing, teaching, and domestic service – began graduating a generation of “New Negroes.”¹²

Domestic service has been praised as a kinder and gentler form of labor, yet what historically makes this trade, regardless of social or racial context, according to Judith Rollins, “an occupation more profoundly exploitative than other comparable occupations” are the personal relationships between employee and employer. What might appear to be the basis of a more humane, less alienating work arrangement allows for a “level of psychological exploitation unknown in other occupations” (156). Intimacy in these work relations is not so much fraudulent as coercive because it is dependent on a tacit distance renewable, ironically, with each gesture of confidence between employee and employer:

Using a domestic as a confidante may, in fact be evidence of the distance in even the closest relationships. Employers can feel free to tell domestics secrets they would not share with friends or family precisely because the domestic is so far from being socially and psychologically significant to the employer. As physically close as the domestic may be, she is so existentially distant in the mind of the employer that the employer does not even entertain the possibility of the domestic’s divulging secrets to those within the employer’s social universe. (167)

Keckley’s sharing of Mrs. Lincoln’s private letters to her with James Redpath, her literary counselor, and their subsequent publication in the Appendix to *Behind The Scenes* was a scandal precisely because it violated not just public decorum but the existential absence of the employee to which Rollins refers. Whether or not Keckley herself authorized the printing of the letters, whether she was intentionally misled or simply incompetently served by Redpath, seems moot.¹³ The appended letters, coupled with Keckley’s reconstructed conversations between the pair, legitimated her claims of intimacy, but that intimacy was a function of Lincoln’s certainty that their relations were *illegitimate* within her own racial and social sphere. Thus, although clearly there would have been outrage at any servant who broke faith, as it were, the nature of the public attacks, and Keckley’s own rhetorical negotiations within her text, are emphatically and distinctively racialized. Publishing her memoir, whose subject (in no small part) and intended audience was within “the employer’s social universe,” was taken, in this particular historical instance, as a breach of the very conditions for women’s interracial relations. As Jean H. Baker astutely notes, Keckley no doubt became Mrs. Lincoln’s “closest friend” “despite or perhaps because of the inequality between an ex-slave, mulatto seamstress and a President’s wife.” Keckley was, “in the First Lady’s view, ‘although colored, . . . very industrious . . . very unobtrusive and will perform her duties faithfully,’” a reminder of Mrs. Lincoln’s “Mammy Sally” (230).¹⁴

This post-War obtuseness to white emotional and epistemological investment in black unobtrusiveness is exposed as early as Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855), with its prescient anticipation of narrative insurrections like Keckley's. Captain Amasa Delano's insistent misapprehension of the relationship between the Spanish captain, Don Benito, and his servant Babo leads him to mistake relations on the mutinied ship for a reassuring "spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other." Delano envies Don Benito "such a friend; slave I cannot call him."¹⁵ As his praise suggests, Delano refuses the possibility of economic or physical coercion in what he self-interestedly reads instead as a genteel and fraternal arrangement. Delano misinterprets Babo's plea that he "is nothing; what Babo has done was but duty" ("Benito Cereno," 16) because it reinforces his desire that the good servant never imposes upon white largesse by assuming he or she is "something." Babo *is* in fact "nothing," for what he "has done" is an empty performance of servile duty (although in another sense "duty" refers to his obligation, and that of the others enslaved on board, to dissemble), designed to fulfill Delano's fantasy of the servant who labors for nothing. And the devaluation of his labor is indexed to his lesser existential status under slave law as three-eighths of a person.

Keckley similarly exploits whites' commitment to the economic and ontological hierarchies embedded in domestic labor practices. If, for their respective attempts, Babo's head ended up on a spear and Keckley was skewered in the press, *Behind The Scenes* nevertheless reveals what material advantage Keckley creates within the terms of her position. As Rollins notes, servants do not have to barter their own secrets in exchange for their employers' because the latter are, as a rule, uninterested in the private details of their servants' lives (*Between Women*, 156). Keckley, in fact, makes Mrs. Lincoln begin *paying* for the intimate license the latter assumes. When Mrs. Lincoln breaks with their usual arrangement to meet at her own residence and drops in unannounced at Keckley's apartment one day in 1864, she pointedly remarks that "I never approved of ladies, attached to the White House, coming to my rooms. I always thought it would be more in keeping with their dignity to send for me, and let me come to them" (152). Her insistence on the tradition of servile etiquette derived from "associations of her early [slave] life" (133) allows her to condescend to the very woman to whom she caters. When Mrs. Lincoln twice visits Keckley in her own chambers, she is actually indebted to her for the inconvenience, for both parties recognize the visits as an encroachment upon Keckley's privacy requiring additional payment of some kind. After the first visit Keckley asks for and receives a "special favor": a "present of the right-hand glove that the

President wears at the first public reception after the second inauguration” (154). The second time Mrs. Lincoln commits this *faux pas*, Keckley obtains permission for herself and a “friend” to hear President Lincoln speak at the White House (175). In both cases Keckley uses Mrs. Lincoln’s personal visits as a way to barter social benefit.

FASHIONING THE MASCULINE

Such examples illustrate the way Keckley negotiates female kinship altogether within the narrative, refiguring the affective work on which sentimental fiction depends. One of the clearest examples of her partition from women appears in her alignment with men. In her grieving for the tragic death in battle of Keckley’s son, her only child (unnamed in the text), we learn only that it is a “sad blow” (105) to her, but when Willie, the Lincolns’ youngest son, dies of fever, Mrs. Lincoln is “inconsolable” (104), a “mater dolorosa”¹⁶ so subject to such “paroxysms of grief” (104) that the President says he will send her to the “lunatic asylum” (104) if she does not control herself. Refusing to allow her eldest, Robert, to enter the military, Mrs. Lincoln is chastised by her husband for elevating maternal propriety over national need: “The services of every man who loves his country are required in this war. You should take a liberal instead of a selfish view of the question, mother” (122). Keckley’s self-presentation is fashioned along these less “selfish” lines of masculine restraint rather than feminine display, as I will explain. Identifying more with Mr. Lincoln’s solemnity, she is more moved by the “grandeur as well as . . . simplicity” (104) of the silently weeping President at his child’s deathbed than by Mrs. Lincoln’s conspicuous distress. When the President is murdered, Keckley silently turns away with tears in her eyes and a “choking sensation” (191) in her throat. She is “awed into silence” (192) like another surviving son, Tad, who mourns his father quietly. Mrs. Lincoln, on the other hand, makes an ungodly “scene – the wails of a broken heart, the unearthly shrieks, the terrible convulsions, the wild, tempestuous outbursts of grief” (192). No such narrative convulsions mark the death of Keckley’s own son. In fact, her emotional restraint extends to the omission of the “golden words of comfort” in “the kind womanly letter” that Mrs. Lincoln wrote when she heard of her “bereavement” (105), though she seems to have little compunction about publishing verbatim from some of their other private letters, and it might have placed her employer in a better light.

James Olney suggests that Keckley’s withholding of vital personal information regarding her ex-husband and only son, a Wilberforce student,

while devoting extensive space to the death of William and President Lincoln, grants white lives an importance she cannot claim for herself (xxxiv). But within that substitution of white for black operates also a shift in gender identification that effectively, if unconventionally, lets Keckley claim not only personal but also historic importance for herself. Just as she gains material and rhetorical advantage through preserving distance from Mrs. Lincoln – and from the archetypal feminine that her “hysterics” (200) represent – she also gains by associating herself with the Lincoln men, and briefly with Jefferson Davis. Unlike Mr. Lincoln, who speaks with fraternal generosity of the “soldierly qualities of . . . brave Confederate generals” (137), Mrs. Lincoln apparently has not the proper sororial feelings toward her own brothers in the Confederate army: “How can I sympathize with a people at war with me and mine?” (136). Keckley says at first she is “relieved” that Mrs. Lincoln has “no sympathy for the South,” but then compares her with her husband, whose “soul was too great for the narrow, selfish views of partisanship” (136).

Keckley's own efforts at what Olney insightfully calls an “alien apologetics” (xxx) – in which she reunites with her previous owners at Rude's Hill (once occupied, she notes, by General Stonewall Jackson for his headquarters) in a spirit of reconciliation (252) – represent, in William Andrews's terms, revisionism “indicative of a historical truth . . . a truth emerging in something the writer faces in the present” (“Reunion,” 15). In this case her “present” (i.e. postwar) reconciliatory stance creates for her an emotional “truth” akin to Mr. Lincoln's presidential condescension to the national brethren. She even claims she can hail the defeated Jefferson Davis, whom she characterized as “a thoughtful, considerate man in the domestic circle” (69): “Peace!” she writes, “You have suffered! Go in peace” (74). Ironically, this attitude, shared by Mr. – but pointedly not by Mrs. – Lincoln is the basis by which Keckley can also reinvent the bonds between women across the color-line. If her Northern friends, she says, could have witnessed her reunion, in which she is literally “carried to the house in triumph,” “they would never have doubted again that the mistress had any affection for her former slave” (250). It is worth noting that it is the attitude Keckley shares with *Mr. Lincoln*, in opposition to that of his wife, that makes possible the erasure of “doubt” about the love of mistresses. This doubt, of course, is one she herself creates in her earlier critical accounts of her mistresses Burwell, who had her beaten (32), and Garland, whose family she almost single-handedly supported at the expense of her health (50). Her narrative suggests that her heart, like the Great Heart, inspires women's love across the color-line.

The rhetorical and economic inversion of mistress and slave in *Behind The Scenes* makes the First Lady a symbolic substitution for Keckley's subjugated position. In Fleischner's perceptive psychoanalytic analysis, Keckley's narrative, "a story of accumulation and debts, the narrator/dressmaker/restrained mourner and the narrated subject/dress buyer/unrestrained mourner Mrs. Lincoln are secret sharers, doubles in mourning and emotional valuation of possessions" (*Mastering Slavery*, 102). Keckley both projects the "Otherness" ideologically associated with African Americans on to Mrs. Lincoln, "while at the same time, in light of the two women's interdependent relationship, [retaining] the phantom presence of the Other in her conception of herself . . . [in order to] give linguistic relief to her conflicted sense of self and achieve a narrative reconciliation with her own traumatic past" (102-3). The function of this process of displacement and projection becomes most clear, I would suggest, if we further consider not only the opposition between the women but the triangulation of desire between the two women and the men who feature so prominently in Keckley's text. From one perspective, for instance, Keckley simply usurps the privileged role of mother from the mistress/employer. Although President Lincoln's term of endearment for Mrs. Lincoln is "Mother," Keckley in fact represents the kind of capitalized maternity Mary Todd Lincoln is incapable of, for as both birth and surrogate mother Keckley transcends regional and racial boundaries. Claiming she loves her families "both black and white" (41), Keckley receives letters from those to whom she was once enslaved in which they name her "mother to us all" (259, 264) and name themselves her children (265). But to the degree it is Keckley who aids the women in "pecuniary embarrassment" (222) such as Mrs. Lincoln and the Garlands (238), and to the extent that hers alone are the sheltering arms the women seek in "terrible affliction" (189) or as death approaches (239), she is more like the supporting head of the household, the figure who stands in for an absent or dead husband.

In fact, Keckley repeatedly aspires to public conduct insistently coded in the text as masculine. Her national leadership, as founder of the Contraband Relief Association in 1862, is an immediate success (she takes pains to include an index of substantial donations) and its high-profile support from black and white notables, from Frederick Douglass to Wendell Phillips, is no doubt designed to highlight her social and political influence outside the sphere of the domestic. And in case readers miss the connection, Keckley concludes by strategically echoing Lincoln's title (and second term) with her own: "Mrs. Lincoln made frequent contributions, as also did the President. In 1863, I was re-elected President of the Association, which office I continue

to hold" (116). Her work with the Contraband Relief Association, effectively placed between a reprinted memorial tribute to Willie Lincoln by Nathaniel Parker Willis and an account of the White House in decorous mourning for the boy, represents her response to others injured, widowed, or abandoned to "cold neglect" (112): the "relief of suffering soldiers . . . suffering blacks" (113). Like Mr. Lincoln – whom she imagines the Lord advising, like Job, to "Gird up thy loins now like a man . . ." (120–1) – Keckley takes action, while Mrs. Lincoln's sphere of vision and movement becomes increasingly constricted: "She could not bear to look upon [Willie's] picture; and after his death she never crossed the threshold of the Guest Room in which he died, or the Green Room in which he was embalmed" (116–17). What Keckley desires, through Mrs. Lincoln, is the potency of Mr. Lincoln, "the Jehovah" (154), the "Moses of my people . . . an idol . . . a demi-god" (190).

What sympathetic feminine reciprocity exists is linked to her allegiance to her race rather than to her employer, Keckley explains, because Mrs. Lincoln was the wife of the President, "the man who had done so much for her race," and thus she "could refuse to do nothing for her" (269). Racial sympathy is cautiously extended to Mrs. Lincoln by other African Americans for similar reasons. Although Mrs. Lincoln recognizes that "most of the good feeling regarding her straitened circumstances proceeds from the colored people" (Keckley, *Behind The Scenes*, 35), the letters from Frederick Douglass and Henry Garnet reveal the extent to which they, too, distanced themselves from a cause that might prove "ridiculous" (319) and jeopardize the pressing interests of the race. Keckley establishes proximity to Mrs. Lincoln, while simultaneously substituting their respective roles, mainly because Mrs. Lincoln exists in closest proximity to the President.

METONYMIES OF DESIRE

This psychic economy of exchange and transference also informs the function of intimate material objects, the giving and collecting of which occupies a disproportionate space of *Behind The Scenes*. Keckley's descriptions sometimes read like a fashion reporter's: "Mrs. Lincoln looked elegant in her rose-colored moire-antique. She wore a pearl necklace, pearl ear-rings, pearl bracelets, and red roses in her hair. Mrs. Baker was dressed in lemon-colored silk; Mrs. Kellogg in a drab silk, ashes of rose; Mrs. Edwards in a brown and black silk; Miss Edwards in crimson, and Mrs. Grimslly in blue watered silk" (89). Her accounts are in the mode of drawing-room realism, but her interest in apparel goes beyond its use as a decorative index of social status.

If Keckley's narrative is "public history privately experienced," as James Olney cogently puts it, then it is also a history of the public experience of private objects – soiled gloves, blood-stained cloaks, Confederate wrappers, and of course Mrs. Lincoln's wardrobe, carefully described throughout and painstakingly invoiced at the narrative's end. Keckley mediates her personal relations – and her relation to national history – through the sartorial.¹⁷

Almost all the women's relations are bartered in some way through clothing. Keckley's aunt, Charlotte, for example, is given a silk dress by Mrs. Garland's mother on "condition that her maid look cheerful, and be good and friendly with her," and "to make friends with her" (155) after Keckley's aunt dares to display unhappiness for being punished. As Mrs. Garland describes it:

A maid in the old time meant something different from what we understand by a maid at the present time. Your aunt used to scrub the floor and milk a cow now and then, as well as attend to the orders of my mother. My mother was severe with her slaves in some respects, but then her heart was full of kindness. She had your aunt punished one day, and not liking her sorrowful look, she made two extravagant promises in order to effect a reconciliation . . . the mistress told her she might go to church the following Sunday, and that she would give her a silk dress to wear on the occasion. (255)

Mrs. Garland's mother's "extravagant" measures to secure the *appearance* of friendliness from her slave suggest the necessary purchase of deception required to uphold the image of close relations. Her admission that "maid" is a euphemism for slave before the war, though meant to distinguish Keckley's current "condition" as domestic servant, nevertheless exposes the similar affective economy at work in both situations between white and black women. This particular exchange of clothing, however, confounds the racial privilege of largesse, for when Mrs. Garland's mother has nothing to wear for an occasion, "the maid proffered to loan the silk dress to her mistress" and she "made her appearance at the social gathering, duly arrayed in the silk that her maid had worn to church on the preceding Sunday" (256).

That such largesse is needed to appease is the subject of another tale Keckley relates (with intent to amuse) in which an ex-slave recently come North complains that "I is been here eight months, and Missus Lingom an't even give me one shife . . . My old missus us't gib me two shifes eber year" (141). Keckley explains that on Southern plantations the mistress "every year made a present of certain under-garments to her slaves, which articles were always anxiously looked forward to and thankfully received. The old woman

had been in the habit of receiving annually two shifts from her mistress, and she thought the wife of the President of the United States very mean for overlooking this established custom of the plantation" (142). Within the humor of the story is the suggestion that combined with the withdrawal of castoffs, which presumably "bought" gratitude from women of color, is the withdrawal also of any semblance of affection: "shiftless" when it comes to others, Mrs. Lincoln is thought "mean." In his chapter "The Clothes Make the Man and the Woman" in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Eugene Genovese notes that "[t]hroughout the South, masters and mistresses distributed clothing in a manner designed to underscore their own benevolence and to evoke gratitude for a supposed gift – a sensitivity to the social significance of clothing that suggests an awareness of the slaves' own positive attitude toward their clothing." Before long, however, "the slaves began to translate these 'gifts' into 'rights' and to let their masters understand as much."¹⁸

The consequences of any failure to fulfill these unwritten contracts of give and take are apparent also in the narrative's close, when Mrs. Lincoln extends to Keckley frequent promises that she will be "well remembered" (358) if the widow manages to see any profit on her wardrobe, reminders of future rewards that increase as Keckley withdraws after not being reimbursed for all her work sewing and negotiating on Mrs. Lincoln's behalf for several months. According to Keckley, the offers of money, which presume a pecuniary relationship, come hand in hand with appeals for sympathy, which by contrast presume bonds of friendship unsullied by the pecuniary. Even as she defers payment, Mrs. Lincoln desperately pleads in her letters for Keckley to write more, for she feels "as if I had not a friend in the world save yourself" (347). But in response to one of Keckley's letters urgently requesting \$500 as partial payment for work to date, Mrs. Lincoln tells her only that when "I get my [wardrobe] back, if ever, from–, I will send you some of those dresses to dispose of at Washington for your own benefit" (360). Shifts too little and too late, apparently, cannot recreate the plantation façade of sororial friendship, especially in the face of a postwar economy in which Keckley has every right to money. Mrs. Lincoln's offer of clothes seems especially antiquated because what need has a seamstress of clothes – the very clothes, in fact, that she had made?

If she rejects the traditional bartering of female ties, however, Keckley still finds old and used clothing immensely valuable for different reasons. Certainly her occupation as seamstress grants her access to the inner domestic circle, and the occasion to comment on the important and mundane events in others' lives: the loss of a lace handkerchief lets her

weigh in concerning the Lincolns' son, Tad, who had "displaced" it – he is "mischievous, and hard to restrain" (89), she concludes. Fitting a dress for Mrs. Lincoln and making "the search for a missing article an excuse" (119), she looks over the shoulder of the President to find out what passage in the Bible he is reading. Another time she is "basting a dress" (130), and overhears arguments between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln about Senators Chase and Steward; later, listening to a conversation between husband and wife as she fits Mrs. Lincoln, she even finds she shares with Mr. Lincoln, of all things, a powerful love of goats (181).

As Sharon Dean suggests, black female servants can transform their historical invisibility into the "potent angle of vision"¹⁹ of inside outsiders, though I would suggest that Keckley's potency lies not simply in the collection of odd tidbits of personal information, however choice to her readers. From Keckley's vantage point she both creates clothing that attracts the attention of those who observe it (78, 101) and, more importantly, uses her association with an object of clothing to turn *herself* into the object of interest. In 1865, at a Chicago charity fair that displayed a wax figure of Jefferson Davis in the outfit in which he was reportedly captured, Keckley makes the "pleasing discovery" that it was clothed in one of the two "chintz wrappers" she had made for Mrs. Davis in 1860 (74).

Though the exhibition is usually surrounded by a "great crowd" (74), Keckley herself soon replaces the wrapper as spectacle:

When it was announced that I recognized the dress as one that I had made for the wife of the Confederate President there was great cheering and excitement, and I at once became an object of the deepest curiosity. Great crowds followed me, and in order to escape from the embarrassing situation I left the building. (75)

The wrapper mediates between Keckley and the Davis family, but there is no simple transfer of interest or social worth. The hidden work of the scene is Keckley's initial and necessary attribution of value to the object: she must first point out to others the significance of the wrapper and herself – and in that gesture, their mutual importance. That part of the scene, however, is suppressed through the passive voice; we do not know how or why some person "announced" Keckley's association, nor how or exactly why Keckley informed him or her, and indeed it must be suppressed because if Keckley is to share in the object's interest, the object must first appear self-evidently interesting. From the Latin *interesse*, "having legal claim or title to," "interest" assumes proprietary investment, and Keckley is the most interested party to an object that, she implies, is a phenomenon endowed with a life and intrinsic worth of its own. But it is the crowd's

“excitement” that functions as demonstrative speculation, driving up the stock of both the things and her person with its “great cheering” that does not simply acknowledge (as Keckley implies) but actually determines the changeable value of the cultural icons – the wax figure, the chintz wrapper, and the seamstress herself.

Despite her best efforts, this value is deflated even within her account. Davis, Keckley concedes, was in fact wearing a “water-proof cloak instead of a dress, as first reported” when captured, but, she insists, this “does not invalidate any portion of my story” (75). The “story” that she wishes to remain viable involves not simply her claim that the wrapper was indeed the one she had made for Mrs. Davis (she offers the exact month and year when it was contracted) but that the clothing *could have been* involved in romantic circumstances. Since she cannot be the indirect instrument for the celebrated cross-dressing escape attempt by the Confederate President because – to her clear disappointment – the tale is fabricated, Keckley can only insist that the “coincidence is none the less striking and curious” (75). Her belaboring the incident is an effort to stitch together an identity based on associative connection, on the public investment in appearance and possibility, if not fact. Clothes, for this reason, construct personae in Keckley’s account. Davis’s wrapper is linked to subterfuge (if erroneously), as is Lincoln’s plaid shawl, which is “rendered somewhat memorable as forming part of his famous disguise . . . when he wended his way secretly to the Capitol to be inaugurated as President” (309), and as is Mrs. Lincoln’s use of heavy black veils when masquerading as Mrs. Clarke in her initial efforts to sell her wardrobe quietly. (Such personae must be tended carefully for, so clothed, they can take on a life of their own. When Keckley insists it would be indelicate of Mrs. Lincoln to leave her hotel at night unaccompanied, she argues that “Mrs. Lincoln has no reason to care what these people may say about her as Mrs. Lincoln, but she should be prudent, and give them no opportunity to say anything about her as Mrs. Clarke” [183].) Like the strategic transvestism so commonly employed by slaves in their flights to freedom, these evasions and escapes dupe because they play off the use of clothing as transparent synecdoche of the self – but in this case cross-dressing is used to signify an alternative public rather than racial self.²⁰

It is the public life of objects that most consumes Keckley. The historic resonance of some articles of clothing or accidental objects retroactively create for her not only a past, but also a prophetic future. She finishes a dressing gown for Jefferson Davis before the Civil War, for instance, “little dreaming of the future that was before it. It was worn, I have not the shadow

of a doubt, by Mr. Davis during the stormy years that he was President of the Confederate States” (69). When, after those “stormy years,” the presidential party toured the fallen Richmond, they “examined every object of interest” (165), and Keckley makes a point of saying she handled the official papers on desks, and “sat in the chair that Jefferson Davis sometimes occupied; also in the chair of the Vice-President, Alexander H. Stephens” (166). But why the fascination with a piece of furniture whose only claim to fame is that it supported some famous person’s posterior?

PALPABLE HISTORY

In one sense, of course, by setting her seat upon theirs, Keckley both subtly insults and assumes the men’s authority. Yet the desire to gaze upon and handle such objects is also an effort to understand and touch history – to make oneself contiguous with the props of historical drama. This desire informs what George Brown Goode, the Director of the US National Museum at the Smithsonian Institute at the *fin de siècle*, called the “museum idea.” In his *Principles of Museum Administration* (1895), Goode calls for democratic access to objects held in common ownership but previously available only to the socially privileged and the wealthy. As Tony Bennett argues, the “museum idea,” deriving from the principles of Benthamist utilitarianism, “rests on the notion that museums should serve as instruments of public instruction” – in other words, “extended circulation”²¹ of select national objects among the unwashed masses might reform the lower and working classes into a more refined citizenry. Keckley’s inclusion as a black working woman on the presidential tour of “every object of interest” is an exercise in edification for both her and her readers; her actual handling of the resolution prohibiting all free colored people from entering the State of Virginia (166) is intended for her audience as an historical lesson in the ironies of injustice. Keckley views these items in their original material context, but they are already transformed in significance by historical events, and already reserved for “tour” observation. For this reason Paul Valéry accused exhibitions and museums of being “mausoleums,”²² entombing objects in an historical vacuum. Indeed, the collected objects function not as a chronology but as a collage of artifacts, as cultural shorthand to a history reassembled in the present. In that sense the objects are made at once familiar and foreign, as the viewers, Keckley included, become tourists of their own culture.

But as in the case of the Davis wrapper, Keckley moves from being a tourist – or tour-guide – to becoming part of the tour. After all, as Keckley’s

handling of the Virginia resolution suggests, the exhibit is transformed by those who interact with it, and thus in a sense become events and exhibitions themselves. And when she returns to the South to visit the Garlands, she sits in the room that "General Jackson always slept in, and people came near and far to look at it." Each visitor to this "idol" "would tear a splinter from the walls or windows of the room, to take away and treasure as a priceless relic" (253). But in the sentence following this remark, *she* becomes the priceless artifact, the "object of great curiosity" (254). Keckley claims she is "clothed . . . with romantic interest" (254) both because she is associated with Mrs. Lincoln, and because she still has an "attachment" for the Garlands, "whose slave I had once been" (254). Both her presidential connections and her "attachment" to her ex-owners position her as a physical medium to a romanticized past.

Keckley seems to anticipate this construction of a past in her request for objects she believes will become "*sacred*" (367). The white glove that President Lincoln wore on his right hand during the ceremony following his second inauguration is a "precious memento" (154) to Keckley precisely because of the social metonymy of clothing: the glove bears "the marks of the thousands of hands that grasped the honest hand of Mr. Lincoln on that eventful night" (155). Even though Mrs. Lincoln insists Keckley has "some strange ideas" in wanting something "so filthy when he pulls it off [that Mrs. Lincoln] would be tempted to take the tongs and put it in the fire" (155), it is the very fact that the glove is "soiled" (158) – the material used in, and standing for, social exchange – that makes it such a coveted object for Keckley. Of course, in Mrs. Lincoln's case, previously worn clothing can also depreciate in value, as Keckley's reprint of a review of the "exposition of Lincoln dresses" in the New York *Evening Express* makes evident: "Some of [the dresses]," the reporter writes, "if not worn long, have been worn much; they are jagged under the arms and at the bottom of the skirt, stains are on the lining, and other objections present themselves to those who oscillate between the dresses and dollars, notwithstanding they have been worn by Madam Lincoln" (304).

In fact, after his death, Mrs. Lincoln is increasingly dissociated from her late husband by a critical public, and so while Keckley collects objects of his, the only objects of interest to her associated with her "friend" are things connected to the President: the dress worn by Mrs. Lincoln at the last inaugural address of Mr. Lincoln (368) and the earrings, "the identical cloak and bonnet worn by Mrs. Lincoln on that eventful night. On the cloak can be seen the life-blood of Abraham Lincoln" (367). The cloak, she explains elsewhere, is especially significant because it "bears the most palpable marks

of the assassination, being completely bespattered with blood, that has dried upon its surface, and which can never be removed" (311), just like the glove that "bears the marks of thousands who shook his hand on that last and great occasion" (368). The blood, it turns out, proved not to be the President's, suggesting that like Davis's wrapper – Keckley's claims notwithstanding – clothes are not incontrovertible "palpable" connections to the famous events and persons. Despite their materiality – which is meant to testify to the legible presence of history, indeed, to testify to the existence of history itself – things offer at best only emotional, and therefore immaterial, links to the past.

Keckley's description of herself lifting "the white cloth from the white face" (190) of Lincoln lying in state thematizes this process of making raiment legible. Her adjectival equation of fabric and face suggests a doubling of the racial veil: lifting the white cloth reveals only another racial mask. But upon Lincoln's racially opaque surface, Keckley inscribes his transcendent divinity, the "god-like intellect" that she reads on his "placid" face. This gesture of exposing the public mask (if only to create another of even more mythic proportions) is itself acutely public: the many distinguished people from the Cabinet and army clustered around Lincoln's body make room for and observe her (190). In that parting of the white crowd for a black woman, Keckley, with Lincoln, becomes a "Moses of my people" (190), the historical guide and racial interpreter for her audience. Indeed, the act of writing and publishing *Behind The Scenes* reproduces this exercise in reading "blank" cloth as textual surface and racial shroud, a canvas on and under which she interprets self and history. In Michael Fried's discussion of "upturned faces" in Stephen Crane's story "The Upturned Face," and in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the "pale, horizontal plane of the corpse's face" similarly evokes the "special blankness of the as yet unwritten page" to create an "allegorization of writing."²³ In Crane's fiction, however, the faces are invariably disfigured, which Fried identifies with the "enterprise of writing," the "force of art" that can only consume or bury, not resuscitate, the natural world ("Realism, Writing," 94–5). Keckley's script does indeed lay Lincoln to rest, but there is no textual pollution of the "white cloth," nor "horror" ("Realism, Writing," 94) at his open casket. Rather, the horror is transformed into poetic opportunity: "Notwithstanding the violence of the death," Keckley writes, "there was something beautiful as well as grandly solemn in the expression . . ." (191). She "gazed long" (191); Lincoln's upturned face is offered up almost willingly as the sacrificial scene of and surface for interpretation, as "the flesh made word."²⁴

Or, put another way, the word – *Behind The Scenes* – can only be written after Lincoln's death. Her collection of "valuable relics" (366) has narrative and symbolic significance only when the presidential flesh is no more. The relics' currency is uncoupled from their status as mere commodity; thus she makes a point of refusing the use or exchange value of objects she inherits or barter for. Rather, she donates what is "too sacred to sell" and "what could not be purchased from me, though many have been the offers for it" (367) to Wilberforce University, where her son was educated. Unable to give up all possessions, however, she withdraws the initial offer of the right-hand glove, explaining in a note that she retains the glove as a "precious *souvenir* of our beloved President" (367). Only as a token and keepsake may such items be privately kept, and whether donated or collected, the objects are out of commercial circulation. "The phenomenon of collecting," Walter Benjamin argues, "loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner."²⁵ But Keckley, though she capitalizes on her objects' "aura" and the Benjaminian metaphysics of origin, would not consider her donation to a public collection as perjury to an object's "original" significance or the meaning vouchsafed it by the owner of the private collection. As Tony Bennett suggests, the placing of art (or objects) in a public collection is not "a loss of history – it is not a double betrayal of the history it once had and of another and ideal history it might have had – but, rather, the acquisition of another history, and of the history it *has* had" (889).²⁶ Keckley's donation, in this sense, lets objects doubly acquire rather than doubly lose history. When she reads the "white cloth" on the "white face" of Lincoln, she grants the inanimate a living history; and by in turn donating what items she does collect, Keckley publicly enshrines the objects' acquisition of this (her) history.

MARKETING INTIMACY

Keckley thus takes pains to distance herself from the marketplace traffic that expedited her patron's fall and violates her ethic of collection. But the accumulation of things verifies her position as consumer, and Keckley seems unwilling to entirely forgo her status as market adept. The distinction, after all, between consumer and commodity is especially important because possession (which even the privilege of donation assumes) of objects separates the seamstress from her erstwhile status as personal chattel. Hence her involvement in the scandalous sale of clothes places her at crosspurposes and becomes a tension that Keckley cannot finally resolve. After all, she initially agrees with and publicly defends (307) – is even instrumental in

managing – the selling of Mrs. Lincoln’s wardrobe, even though by the narrative’s end she tries to set herself above the market system to preserve her reputation. A letter to Bishop Payne of Wilberforce University indicating her intent to donate appears not accidentally after a letter from Mrs. Lincoln pleading with her to reject a scheme for money that Keckley had proposed in an earlier letter “announcing that [Mrs. Lincoln’s] clothes were to be paraded in Europe” (364–6), but Keckley suggests she never had any plan to traffic in selling and spending. Insisting she holds to a moral economy unlike her employer’s, Keckley argues that despite her incriminating actions, she had always thought that Mrs. Lincoln’s plan to use her expensive wardrobe as an insurance against poverty was “borrowing trouble from the future” (270).

Critics, however, saw no distinction: *Behind The Scenes* was received as a similarly unforgivable peddling of private wares, especially because Keckley lays bare her own and Mrs. Lincoln’s “motives” (xiv) for money as much as for reputation. Bankrupted by her unremunerated alliance with Mrs. Lincoln in the postwar years, Keckley explains in her concluding words that if “poverty did not weigh me down” (330), she would not be writing. Her pleas of poverty, though, worked only against her, for they confirmed the unacceptable obvious: that their employer-employee “friendship” was primarily a function of money. Booker T. Washington had promised whites that “interlacing our industrial [and] commercial” lives would assure them of being “surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people the world has seen” (*Up From Slavery*, 221); *Behind The Scenes* seemed to breach the contract exchanging employment opportunity for emotional guarantees. Some in the black community feared a white backlash from Keckley’s actions and distanced themselves from her (Foster, *Written by Herself*, 129). Mrs. Lincoln reportedly refused to speak to Keckley after the narrative’s publication. Her other white regulars, too, refused her – not out of sympathy for the late President’s widow, but for the seamstress’s racial heresy in expecting payment for “services” that included acts of loyalty and labor that whites hoped need not be bought in the postwar era. Despite her extraordinary ability to manipulate the conditions of her employment to her advantage, in 1868 Keckley crossed a line of which, given the flux of legal and racial renegotiations of labor relations in those early years of Reconstruction, neither she nor her white employers and audience were probably fully cognizant.²⁷ With the line so clearly drawn across the life and career of Keckley, however, African American writers in her wake were far more circumspect about suggesting that intimacy required reimbursement.

CODA: SERVICING MARIE IN GRACE KING'S
MONSIEUR MOTTE

In the reciprocal dependency of slavery . . . the slaves needed masters and mistresses they could depend on; they did not need masters and mistresses to love them. But the whites needed their servants' love and trust. The slaves had the upper hand, and many of them learned how to use it.

Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*²⁸

The social and financial ostracism Keckley received in payment for writing *Behind The Scenes* suggests the degree to which domestic service, as a model for close working race relations, inherited some of the affective contours if not the legal shape of slavery. Published twenty years later, Grace King's Reconstruction novel, *Monsieur Motte* (1888), is still mourning what King saw as the prelapsarian days of slavery when, as she pictures it, devotional dusky servants tended to the intimate *toilette* of white women. An opening scene in the novel (one of a tetralogy set in New Orleans) clarifies more keenly what is at stake in the white audience's – particularly white women's – profound repudiation of Keckley and of any compensation for any other black domestics who might publish the “private archives” (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 212) of white lives. In this exchange Marie, the white ingénue, is thanking Marcéline, her loyal black servant and “*confidante*,” for bringing her new white satin boots:

[Marie] put her arms around the *bonne's* neck and laid her head on the broad soft shoulder . . . “Ah Marcéline, my uncle can never be as kind to me as you are. He gives me money, but you – .” She felt the hands patting her back and the lips pressing against her hair; but she could not see the desperate, passionate, caressing eyes “savoring” her like the lips of a dog. (33)²⁹

The devotion of the servant assuming the ardor of a lover involves a translation the difficulty of which is suggested by the impossible strain of her simile (Marcéline's eyes as *dog's-lips?*). Marie in turn responds to something untranslatable offered by Marcéline, in this case marked by the discreet dash (“he gives me money, but you –”), a gift that constitutes a certain emotional indebtedness to the *bonne* in contrast to the implied pecuniary obligation to the uncle. But clearly it is Marcéline for whom duty becomes desire. These women's devotional bonds function on an arc of compulsion and consent – in other words, an erotically charged “female world of love and ritual”³⁰ complicated by the race and class hierarchies structuring domestic service after Reconstruction.

Setting devotional relationships in the context of historicized and evolving gender roles, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that any examination of homosocial ties must shift from “a concern with deviance to that of defining configurations of legitimate behavioral norms and options . . . [and should] emphasize general cultural patterns rather than the internal dynamics of a particular family or childhood” (*Disorderly Conduct*, 54). While I agree that one must view Marcéline’s passionate involvement with the girl not as “deviant” but as part of a larger cultural impulse on the part of whites to “normalize” postwar relations, Smith-Rosenberg’s analysis does not take into account the women’s relative standings with regard to sexual maturity, nor their shifting relations over time from adolescence to adulthood, and from antebellum to postwar conditions, when many emancipated “mammies” were taking their leave. All of these factors are crucial here since Marcéline’s labor of love finally subjugates this emancipated slave, and it is narrativization of love’s labor that constitutes King’s response to the Civil War’s disruption of the rites of female adolescence dependent on black-white intimacy. Conflating the love of service with the service of love, King works to retrieve imaginatively once institutionalized antebellum relations between female slave and mistress.

Monsieur Motte’s titular hero and the uncle Marie has never met is Marcéline’s invention. As erstwhile family slave and survivor of the Civil War and death of Marie’s parents, Marcéline supports the child – too young at the time to remember her genealogy – under the ostensible aegis of Monsieur Motte, putting her through the Catholic girls’ school where she is employed as hairdresser. The novel’s sequels, *On the Plantation*, *The Drama of An Evening*, and *Marriage of Marie Modeste* follow Marie’s fate after her social-debut graduation, and the revelation of Marcéline’s “grotesque masquerade” (79). Anticipating reactionary elements in both Thomas Dixon’s and Margaret Mitchell’s romances (Marcéline is a cross between the scheming Lydia in *The Clansman* and Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*), *Monsieur Motte* was first rejected for publication by Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of *Century*, then handled by Charles Warner, contributing editor to *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, who placed the manuscript finally with the *New Princeton Review*. Written as “antitexts”³¹ to more progressive fiction, King intentionally attempted to wrest history from the likes of George Washington Cable, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Albion Tourgee, and Edward King, who she felt misrepresented the South and tore apart the loving kinship of white and black she believed existed under slavery. Her literature, she argued, was intended to “bring us all nearer together blacks and whites.”³²

IMPERSONATING MEN, MISCEGENATING WOMEN

Critics have suggested that Marcélite's attachment for Marie, what King called the "holy passion of the Negro woman"³³ for her mistress, simply reflects a "misguided"³⁴ love, but I would suggest that such representations of homoerotic unions across the color-line directly guide us to cultural anxieties about miscegenation. To argue so, of course, is to ignore the critical presumptions of heterosexuality and sexual conversation (at least in its most literal sense) in the term "miscegenation"; but then the apparently prurient national obsession with "amalgamation" is not really about sex. It is, at least in part, as Eva Saks suggests, about the way representations of sex secure norms of identity (national and/or racial) and lines of property. Miscegenation – the "taboo of too different," she suggests – is historically and legally associated with incest and sodomy – the "taboo of too similar," since these "crimes" rely on a "pair of bodies which are mutually constitutive of each other's deviance . . . [Thus] neither body can represent the norm, because each is figured as deviance from an other." According to this reasoning, same-sex or intrafamilial relations fall beyond the pale because the "pair of bodies . . . upon conjunction . . . are too similar to each other and too different from the 'norm.'"³⁵

Under these terms Marie and Marcélite in *Monsieur Motte* exhibit the tendency to be *both* too similar (shared gender) and too different (racial poles). But in this narrative and others in which "miscegenating" women are also ex-slave/servant and mistress/employer, the difference-in-sameness *produces* the norm: the women's relations are coded in the narratives as a necessary and "natural" preparation for or accommodation to traditional heterosexual marriage.³⁶ Involved in the rites of white women's (hetero)sexual coming-of-age, Marcélite, as hairdresser and *de facto* guardian of the Southern debutante, serves as a "proximate male"³⁷ upon whose intimate physical services the white women are dependent for the effect of womanhood. Homoeroticism shares with miscegenation the threat to lines of blood and property because by competing for white female affection the black women appear to disturb patronymic influence (disrupting "blood" reproduction) and inheritance (the dispersal of property along those bloodlines). And yet, as this chapter explains, same-sex coupling in these texts eventually proves *fundamental* to the maintenance of class, sex, and especially racial norms, suggesting how we might understand how, in Judith Butler's terms, "homosexuality [or any same-sex pairing] and miscegenation . . . converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction."³⁸

Philip Brian Harper argues that antimiscegenation sentiment and homophobia “derive their impetus largely from a common organizing principle: the sanctity of the private realm as a means by which to control the flow of economic capital.”³⁹ Miscegenation, that is, presumes “two equal subjects to the extent that they agree to behave as though each has command of a private realm,” which “implies the reconceptualization of a non-white individual, not as a privatized object, but as private subject (who would then, by definition, be entitled to hold private property)” (Harper, “Private Affairs,” 124). In King’s novel the white anxiety over ownership of privatized property – in this case, Marcélite herself – is heightened because she is an *ex-slave*; in other words, she is property that, at least in the language of possessive individualism, now owns itself. In this way she becomes a “private subject,” as it were, by becoming her own personal property. Provocatively, for most of the novel she refuses to relinquish title to Marie by keeping the white girl’s family history a secret from her. By doing so Marcélite attempts, through her financial sponsorship of Marie, to “own” she who had previously possessed her, in effect rendering Marie the “paid for” (King, *Monsieur Motte*, 97) private property of previously privatized property.

Though King, a devout segregationist, represents Marcélite’s loyalty to her white charge as admirable – albeit only because she believed it “highly honorable to the Southern women that they could be so served and loved by slaves”⁴⁰ – the novel invalidates the black woman’s attempt to lay claim to an *a priori* “private realm” – and by extension to Marie – by insisting that to do so she must construct a surrogate self, a fictional “uncle” for Marie named Monsieur Motte. This persona is legal proxy for the non-existent male family relation who would have had, in fact, *de jure* rights to the girl. As Monsieur Motte, Marcélite becomes the sole bearer of Marie’s pedigree, hiding on her person the papers that prove Marie is descended from white Southern aristocracy. When Marcélite confesses her avuncular ruse, she searches her dress, “fumbling, feeling, passing, repassing inside her torn dress-waist” (101), at last handing over the “little worn-out prayer book . . . filled with dates and certificates . . . unanswerable champions for the honor of dead men and the purity of dead women” (102) to the only “real” man in the novel, Monsieur Goupilleau, “master” and “saviour” (96), and later Marie’s stepfather. Until that moment Marcélite had “carried around *in my body* now for seventeen years . . . the precious relics, discolored and worn from bodily contact” (emphasis mine, 102). Physically incorporated with Marcélite, these papers become a kind of miscegenated body – part white, part black, and part flesh, part text – until she is forced to “cry uncle,” as it were, and becomes, “stripped of her disguise” (106),

“a wretched substitute crouching, cringing, trembling . . . unnaturally, unrecognizably” (105) before Marie. Of course, this “substitute” (ironically, for the *other* substitute, Monsieur Motte) must be recognized, the novel suggests, as the “natural” Marcélite. She is, we are told, after all is said and done, only a “fool nigger” (97) with “false assurances of her own capability” (51), who has no right to her interest in Marie – a “love, which had always been unscrupulous . . . ferocious, insatiable” (107).

RACIAL FIDELITY AND ROMANTIC DISCIPLINE

For King this controversy over rightful racial and appropriately gendered partners is important because Marcélite's bid for parity threatens Marie's financial and sexual solvency: Marie almost loses her wealthy fiancé until Marcélite produces the papers proving the girl is from “pure” heritage; and, perhaps more importantly, Marie's extended intimacy with Marcélite threatens to make her unfit for men. On the one hand female bonds are the most eroticized: the St. Denis Institute all-girls' school is littered with classbooks dedicated to *girl*friends that “when opened would direct you to a certain page on which was to be found the name of ‘celle que j'aime,’ or ‘celle que j'adore,’ or ‘mon amie chérie,’ or ‘ma toute dévouée’” (59). When the school's headmistress, Madame Eugenie Lareveillère, revisits her old “*amie de coeur*” (125), the unmarried Mademoiselle Aurore Angely, she finds they renew their friendship – cooing, petting, calling each other by their old school “pet names” – by again becoming blushing seventeen-year-olds, “dreaming . . . of love and a first lover” (171):

[Aurore] had gone back, back, in her life, far away from the present; where was she going to stop, in the sweet loveliness of her caressing manner and words? . . . It was worth so much . . . to meet again as they had started in life, heart open to heart, tongue to garrulous tongue, all revealed, understood, nothing concealed, – absolutely nothing. (176–7)

Yet, despite this “tongue to . . . tongue” ecstasy, Marie's headmistress reflects with concern about her unwed friend: “Heavens! what a difference a man makes in a woman's looks, – that is, of course, a man who is not a brother, – poor Aurore!” At school Aurore's relations with her sex had been as close as possible; she was *la plus femme des femmes*. Now economical Nature seemed stealthily recalling one by one charms that had proved a useless, unprofitable investment; flattening her chest, straightening her curves, prosaïcising [*sic*] her eyes, diluting her voice” (126). According to this use-it-or-lose-it theory of sexual identity, intense intragender relations simultaneously make one

la plus femme des femmes (the most womanly of women) and yet somehow the least, most diminished, of women – flat, straight, diluted, prosaic.

Marcélite worries that she has kept Marie too long to herself for similar reasons, wondering, “Other girls were women in appearance at Marie’s age; why did she not shed her childhood also? Why did not her arms round and her shoulders soften? Why could not some of her own exuberant flesh and blood be given to her *bébé*?” (145). To invoke again Eva Saks’s argument, if Marie and Marcélite are too similar in terms of gender to make the white girl a “woman,” then neither can they exchange bodies – “flesh and blood” – as Marcélite would like, because they are too different in terms of race. Yet we see how their “miscegenating” relationship actually enables its apparent antithesis: white-on-white, cross-sex desire. Marcélite’s love for Marie is structured by what one might call the “romantic discipline” of servant relations, necessary because she has “pierced the protection of . . . secluded femininity” (King, 16) supposedly preparatory for male-female relations. She is not only the “hairdresser of the school,” but also the “general *chargée d’affaires, confidente*, messenger, and advisor of teachers and scholars” (19). She, like King’s other black domestics, is both knowing voyeur and unsuspecting object of scopophilic fascination. In *The Drama of an Evening*, for instance, King watches the “help” watch a New Orleans *soirée*:

The hairdressers and maids . . . had the privilege of the steps all the way down to the [dance] floor beneath. They sat . . . exchanging their bold, frank, and characteristically shrewd comments on their whilsom masters and mistresses. What did they not know of the world in which destiny had placed them in the best of all possible positions for observation? (212)

King grants the servants a worldly ringside view, nonthreatening because they remain offstage as well as “aggressively . . . loyal” in “their obstinate servility to family and name” (213). In short, the judgments passed by blacks serve to approve rather than enjoin the social play before them: “It was a pleasure to look up and see them, to catch a furtive greeting or demonstration of admiration. Their unselfish delight in the enjoyment of others gave a consecration to it” (213). King’s religious justification – that servants’ stations are both divinely sanctioned (“destiny”) and spiritually sanctioning (“consecration”) – develops from her insistence that black love is an act of faith not a form of obligation. In a letter to Charles Dudley Warner, King explains that she rejected a friend’s suggestion to justify Marcélite’s extreme devotion to her charge by suggesting she was saved from the auction block. She refuses rational or psychological motivation because, she says, the “[g]reat instances of devotion . . . among even the worst treated

slaves" reflect so well upon the *mistresses* who apparently simply inspire it.⁴¹ Yet the narratorial scrutiny of blacks in such scenes betrays the fear that the crowd on the stairs is less than devotional or sanctifying. Just as Babo's support of Don Benito is actually menacing – "the black with one arm still encircled his master" (Melville, "Benito Cereno," 14) – so the servants ringing the dancefloor are vaguely threatening: the girls "danced round and round in the circle bounded by the rows of darkly-clad chaperones, as if they did not see them, their anxious, calculating fears, their sombre-hued bodies, or their sombre-hued lives" (205). If the girls do not seem to see their "chaperones," the narrator certainly does – but in their conspicuous invisibility lies the threat not of violence but of abandonment.

SAVAGE HAIR: COIFFING RACE

Marcélite's peculiar hold over the girls she chaperones, for example, is clear when she fails to show up in time to prepare the hair of the principal and graduating class of the Institute. Madame Lareveillère views "being deserted in a critical moment by a trusted servitor, dropped without warning by a confidante, left with an indifference" as "heartlessness." This public exposure to "the prying eyes and gossiping tongue of a stranger, – not the mere trivial combing, was what . . . approached tragic seriousness" (73). But Marcélite's failure to show up (before her confession about "Monsieur Motte") is also the highest apostasy because the women lose not only face but also their femininity – and with that, their racial distinctiveness. Their *deshabille* reflects atavistic regression: similarly left uncoiffed, Mrs. Joubert, the French teacher, "had returned to . . . that most primitive and innocent way of combing her hair, called *la sauvagesse*. Unrelieved by the soft perspective of Marcélite's handiwork, her plain, prominent features stood out with the savage boldness of rocks on a shrubless beach. 'How frightfully ugly!' thought Madame Lareveillère" (65). Without Marcélite's skill to prevent the "uglification process" (46), as one character puts it, the girls, with an "unfinished appearance . . . [to] their heads" (75), end up each looking like "a *nègre*" (72) – that is, not only looking "black" but, with this invocation of the French masculine form, also looking male. As Helen Taylor points out, Marcélite's "art distinguishes the two races and sexes from each other," and her "nonappearance reveals how fragile is the construct of femininity, and indeed of whiteness" (*Gender, Race, and Region*, 55). Although Marcélite is made to realize that "the difference between Madame's head and hers [is] between a consciousness limited by

eternity and one limited by a nightly sleep" (48), the chaos in her absence suggests racial difference is, in fact, only a hairdo away.

Marcélite's *métier* of hairdresser is itself a deeply erotic, fetishizing occupation, if we are to believe Freud.⁴² Yet she only mediates attraction, because for Marcélite to desire or be desired is to become "a monster of selfishness" (107). Marcélite is associated with the "hot, dull, heavy, dangerous maturity" (113–14) of her race, and thus is pivotal in the transformation of both Madame and Marie into Women, existing as an icon of primitive forces that prevents the "closing up of the hidden passage" (87), the fate of spinsters.⁴³ Marcélite, as both a servant and a black woman – made knowledgeable by vocation and history, according to King – understands desire, and is, for that very reason, desirable. In her reading of Annie Leclerc's essay "The Love-Letter," a meditation in part on Vermeer's painting "Lady Writing A Letter, with her Maid," Jane Gallop points to the representation of the woman-servant as closely connected to the source of feminine knowledge, to the "secret well of immanent femininity" (170): "The woman servant stands in all-knowing plenitude. She is full, present, solid, round, and she knows . . . The maid is narcissistically, pleurably whole unto herself, hence her desirability" (173).⁴⁴ Preparing Eugenie's negligee for her suitor, Marcélite aids the naïve and inept woman, whose "white fingers . . . could only wander aimlessly amid the bows and laces" (164). The hairdresser, on the other hand, needs "neither directions nor explanations. Her dark face glowed with intelligence; she seemed transformed by a sudden illumination" (165), causing Eugenie to exclaim that, just as she suspected, "Marcélite is more of a woman than Aurore" (166).

The black woman's attractiveness – her features "regular and handsome according to the African type" and erotic, "with a strong sensuous expression, subdued but not obliterated" (17) – incites sexual yearning, the "gratification of desire" (127), but not for *her*. The same-sex dynamics across the color-line come to dissemble, rather than disassemble, the very straight and very white Kingdom of Womanhood.⁴⁵ We see this process of the racial sponsorship of white heterosexuality throughout King's work: when Mademoiselle Aurore considers devoting her life to the saints, she simply makes a "visit to the [slave] quarters, and talking to the women there" (148) she rejects "martyrdom" (148) and holds out for marriage. Similarly, on their "entrance into the 'great world'" (205) in *The Drama of An Evening*, the young girls dance with prospective husbands, but it is not the white men but the "colored pianist," Benoit, whose "dark bold head . . . could be seen in passionate movement" (203), who sexually awakens them.⁴⁶ The girls cannot help giving themselves over to the "pleasure of the dance":

with that new blood beating in their veins, and new life bursting in their hearts under the forceful music of Benoit, – that warm, free, full, subtly [*sic*] sensualized African music . . . The buds themselves would have burst into blossom under the strains . . . (230).

The girls are like newborns, their heads “still wet with the touch of holy water” (182), and like Benoit, Marcélite’s assigned role is to help birth the white woman to the white man, hence the *bonne*’s rejection also of the cult of piety (154).

Even the servant’s invention, Monsieur Motte, is an avuncular front for erotic interest. When the headmistress, Madame Lareveillère, initially resists her suitor, Goupilleau, she protests by curiously reproducing the relationship between Marie and Marcélite, comparing herself to the girl and Goupilleau to the girl’s “uncle”: “I look upon him as a father, and he treats me as if I was his daughter . . . He is very old, – as old as Monsieur Motte himself . . . He is just exactly like a father, I assure you” (88). Yet the screen of Goupilleau as father allows the two to smoulder for each other for years (they will eventually marry), just as Marcélite as uncle masks the racial taboo of her own love with the sexual taboo of incest.

When Marcélite rebels, then, her racial insurgency is not surprisingly cast as a lover’s “jealousy” (154): “As if the Virgin would do more for her than I! As if the Virgin could love her more, – as if God could love her more than I!” (154). In Madame Lareveillère’s room, too, a virile Marcélite rebels against the “Virgin Mother” with whom she is in direct competition for Marie:

The cords of her short, thick neck stood out, and her broad, flexible nostrils rose and fell with passion. Her untamed African blood was in rebellion against the religion and civilization whose symbols were all about her in that dim and stately chamber . . . She felt a crushing desire to . . . reassert the proud supremacy of brute force. (51)

African atavism is meant to save Marie from the neutering effects of Christian civilization (from the Virgin, but also, it is suggested, from the risk of permanent virginity). The Virgin is not her only competition: Marcélite is equally threatened by her own Monsieur Motte, and senses almost immediately that Marie’s fictional uncle will supplant their apparent same-sex sufficiency. In the scene alluded to at the outset of this chapter, Marcélite and Marie put on the coveted white boots that the former has purchased for Marie’s graduation. I quote at length because it defies paraphrase:

“Let us try them on,” said Marcéline. She knelt on the floor and stripped off one shoe and stocking. When the white foot on its fragile ankle lay in her dark palm, her passion broke out afresh. She kissed it over and over again; she nestled it in her bosom; she talked baby-talk to it in creole; she pulled on the fine stocking as if every wrinkle were an offense, and slackness an unpardonable crime. How they both labored over the boot – straining, pulling, smoothing the satin, coaxing, urging, drawing the foot! What patience on both sides! What precaution that the glossy white should meet with no defilement! Finally the button-holes were caught over the buttons, and to all intents and purposes a beautiful, symmetrical, solidified satin foot lay before them. (33–4)

Despite the pleasure of being shod, it is only, in Marie’s view, a prelude: “what would the reality be, if the foretaste were so sweet” (34), she wonders, repeatedly asking if her uncle will be “pleased . . . satisfied” (35) with her. Even as she is listening “dreamily and contentedly to praises thrown off by Marcéline’s fluent tongue” (34), Marie is wondering what her uncle will say. The “straining, pulling . . . coaxing, urging, drawing” (33) is apparently only symbolic initiation – the boot, “too tight” (34) at first, “will stretch” (34) with use. Marcéline herself is a tight fit, unable to wedge her bulk through the “diminutive door” (16) that guards the St. Denis. Her difficult squeeze suggests that though she is “indispensable” (19), she is also not easily lodged in the girls’ school. The phallus that Marie and Marcéline create – the “beautiful, symmetrical, solidified, satin foot” (34) – in place of the nonexistent uncle, the patriarchal void, turns out to be necessary but also necessarily temporary fetish.

The carefully bound appendage is the physical duplication of another phallic construction, Monsieur Motte; King is careful to point out both as “masquerade” (79) once their purpose is fulfilled.⁴⁷ Indeed, Marie realizes, in the fourth in the series, *Marriage of Marie Modeste*, that all the time she spent with her *bonne* and at the school was in preparation for her husband: “Everything I did was for him . . . Oh I feel like a woman now; I know what it is to be a woman” (292). After Marcéline’s revelation to Marie, she finds it “impossible to awake an interest in Marie” (150), feels she would prefer the “loud-mouthed fury and passion of her own people down there in the [slave] quarters, than this apathetic *white* silence” (150). Marriage is the goal of female relations – white or black – but it is also the end of them; marriage, therefore, becomes a “burial procession” (281), the bride a “corpse” (282) in *Marriage of Marie Modeste*.

Because black duty is recuperated as unrequited desire, homoerotic interest serves to reinstitute slaveholding bondage in King’s fiction: Marcéline’s faithful service becomes sexual fidelity, a loyalty motivated by neither

whip nor marketplace and thus not subject to the legal or economic changes that King so deplored.⁴⁸ Not accidentally, King's fantasy historically coincides with, even as it directly contradicts, the divorcing of white and black women's interests, reflected in the escalating tensions within ladies' clubs and women's events in the 1880s and 1890s.⁴⁹ As relations between "sisters" across the color-line became increasingly tenuous, black women became more politically outspoken in their desire to "establish mechanisms of representation" (Carby, "Women's Era," 245) for African Americans, to be released from the publicly circulated exoticizing and romanticizing discourses of blackness. Thus Marcélite stands in striking contrast to the black political agitation of the day. Her love for Marie seeks no manumission; Marie may abandon her *bonne* to marry but Marcélite will never break faith or contract with her white charges. In fact, in *Monsieur Motte*, reflecting King's hyperbolic need to reinvent the mistress-servant covenant, black women cannot even bear release from their employ.