"The Guide-Posts of Memory":
Trauma, Loss, and Stoic Silence in Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*

Regardless of the time period they study, most U.S. historians are at least passingly familiar with figures like Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and the narratives they wrote in service of the antislavery movement.¹ For fugitive slaves who became public figures in abolition, slave narratives were part of a larger performative strategy used to represent the inhumanity of slavery and the capacity of African Americans to largely white audiences. These “professional fugitives” not only represented the cause and interests of their brothers and sisters in bondage, but were also seen as representative of the character and potential of enslaved men and women who would one day be free.² Thus the authors of slave narratives came to quite literally “represent the race” not only in their autobiographies, but also through a broader spectrum of public performance that ranged from speech-making to political demonstrations. The images of slavery and race which these activists presented to the public challenged not only pro-slavery ideology, but also the degraded and passive images of slaves that often formed the basis of white antislavery rhetoric. In this way, African Americans actively contributed to nineteenth century debates about race and the relationship between blackness and slavery.

African Americans continued to use their personal histories to challenge the public’s understanding of race, gender, and bondage in the years following emancipation. In fact, former slaves actually wrote more autobiographies between 1865 and 1930 than in the six decades preceding the Civil War.³ In terms of the different circumstances of their production and publication, post-bellum slave narratives are a


³ 76 first-edition slave narratives were published by African Americans from 1800 to 1865, while 82 were published 1866-1930. These numbers are based on William Andrews’ exhaustive bibliography; I have excluded reprints and the narratives of non-African Americans in my own calculations. See Andrews, “Scholarly Bibliography of Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives,” Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/biblintro.html> (April 27, 2011).
distinct genre. These memoirs were not written in the context of an organized movement for social and political change. Their authors were not part of a single community, but rather wrote and published as individuals at different moments in time. Yet, these narratives may still be understood as a politically-charged body of work which fits into the larger tapestry of African American efforts to remember slavery, hold the nation accountable for the promises of freedom, and construct a usable past in the decades following emancipation.

Many scholars have argued that the post-bellum narratives represent a turning away from the slave past, as former slaves sought to demonstrate their fitness for citizenship by highlighting their accomplishments in freedom. While many narrators did strive to fashion a successful post-emancipation self, the experience and memory of slavery nonetheless remained integral to the story they chose to tell about their lives. As the nation itself struggled to come to terms with the meaning and memory of the Civil War and the causes for which it had been fought, the authors of post-bellum slave narratives effectively performed a counter-narrative to white constructions of Civil War memory that idealized the Old South or romanticized the common sacrifice of white soldiers. In the process, they also created images of black manhood and womanhood that challenged the raced and gendered stereotypes perpetuated by whites. These narratives are a particularly rich source for scholars interested in women’s memories of slavery because almost 15% of them were written by African American women. That is nearly three times the number of slave narratives written by or about women before 1865.

The memoir of Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, is by far the most-studied of women’s post-bellum narratives. It also received the most press

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6 Of the 88 narratives written 1866-1930, 12 were by or about women; only 5 of the narratives written 1745-1865 were by or about women. See Andrews, “Scholarly Bibliography of Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives.”
coverage at the time of its publication in 1868 due to Keckley’s personal relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley was Mrs. Lincoln’s dressmaker and sometime companion during Abraham Lincoln’s tenure in the White House and *Behind the Scenes* revealed intimate details regarding the family’s affairs. Most contemporary reviewers and many subsequent scholars concentrate on the portions of Keckley’s narrative related to the President and his wife. My own analysis focuses instead on how Keckley engages with her history of enslavement throughout the text, constructing not only a memory of what it meant to live under that yoke as a woman, but also demonstrating how slavery continued to impact her life long after she gained her freedom. When Keckley wrote and published her narrative, gave public readings, and responded to critics, she was effectively performing her own interpretation of slavery, freedom, and African American womanhood for the public. The backlash she experienced in the press reveals how important the public declarations of Keckley and other female narrators were in a country where slavery had ended, but racism remained. While this paper focuses on Keckley’s performance, my findings reveal common elements among women’s post-bellum narratives as a whole.

Slavery was an institution that attempted to erase the history – and thus the humanity – of the men and women who were held as human chattel. The ideology of the Lost Cause and the nation’s movement toward reunion and reconciliation were another attempt to erase that history and former slaves’ memories of it. African American women responded to both of these attempts at erasure. First, by documenting and

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7 I have found almost 50 advertisements, reviews, and articles related to Keckley and her book in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century press.
8 For notices and reviews of Keckley’s public readings, see, for example, “Personal,” *The Quincy Whig* (Quincy, Illinois), 11 July 1868; “Untitled,” *Flake’s Bulletin* (Galveston, Texas), 17 July 1868; “Mrs. Keckley’s Readings in Boston,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), 24 July 1868; “MEIONAON—Tremont Temple: Extraordinary Novelty!,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 24 June 1868; “‘Mrs. Keckley’ as a Reader,” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), 18 June 1868. Scholar Jennifer Fleischner discovered Keckley’s written response to critics, which was apparently forwarded to the *New York Citizen* by her publisher, Carleton & Co. In the letter, Fleischner writes, Keckley asked, “Was it because ‘my skin is dark and that I was once a slave’ that I am being ‘denounced?’ … ‘As I was born to servitude, it was not fault of mine that I was a slave; and, as I honestly purchased my freedom, may I not be permitted to express, now and then, an opinion becoming a free woman?’” See Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 317-318.
memorializing their own histories and those of their families. And second, by challenging the nation to acknowledge that the legacy of slavery remained a living presence – in African American lives and in the republic – even after emancipation brought its legal end. Because of their place in an organized political movement, the antebellum slave narratives sought to comment on slavery as an institution as much as to tell the individual narrator’s story. In contrast, post-bellum narrators engage in the more intimate political act of writing themselves and their families into national history, not as the undifferentiated “millions ... groaning in bondage” that abolitionists referred to, but as individual men and women whose lives were shaped by slavery in concrete ways. What results is a narrative that is not only more focused on personal identity, but one which also gives detailed testimony regarding the experience of the author’s family members – who could not or did not write their own life histories.

Through her narrative, Keckley effectively reenacts the history of her family’s disruption in slavery. The pivotal moment in which Keckley becomes conscious of her slave status centers on her parent’s separation and her mistress’s cold reaction to her mother’s grief. When Keckley is still young, her parents are separated permanently when her father is taken West by his owner. Keckley remembers their parting as a dramatic and emotional event and describes it in language meant to be heart-wrenching. But seared as deeply in her mind as her parent’s last embrace is the unfeeling way Keckley’s mistress responded to her mother’s grief. Keckley writes, “Deep as was the distress of my mother in parting with my father, her sorrow did not screen her from insult. My old mistress said to her: ‘Stop your nonsense; there is no necessity for you putting on airs. ... There are plenty more men about here, and if you want a husband so badly, stop your

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9 *Liberator*, 1 February 1850.
10 Keckley’s family unit was already an endangered space prior to this event because her parents were in an abroad marriage, owned by different masters. Keckley recalls the challenges her parents faced in seeing one another regularly and the way she was robbed of a more intimate knowledge of her father because of the infrequency of their time together. See Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 22-23.
crying and find another.’ To these unfeeling words,” Keckley writes, “my mother made no reply. [But]
turned away in stoic silence ...”¹¹

While Keckley’s re-telling preserves the memory of this pivotal event in her and her parents’ lives,
she also uses her narrative to offer further testimony to the strong emotional connection they felt for one
another despite whites’ utter disregard for their feelings. Keckley reveals that her mother and father
maintained a correspondence for several years after their separation. Keckley recalls that her father’s
letters were always filled with his hope of a reunion and a special message of love and affection for her, his
only child. What is most remarkable is that Keckley’s mother saved these and other letters written during
slavery. She found a way to preserve them – through multiple separations and relocations – in order to
pass them on to her daughter, a record of love and separation handed down like a family heirloom. Keckley
reproduces the text of one of her father’s letters in her narrative, thus allowing him to testify directly, in his
own words. Her inclusion of this text is even more remarkable when one considers that antebellum slave
narratives usually included documents written by well-known white men who testified to the narrative’s
authenticity. By including her father’s letter, Keckley authenticates her own history and places herself and
her father on the same level of authority previously assumed by respectable white members of the
community.

African American women also responded to attempts to erase their history by showing readers how
the experience of slavery continued to shape their lives in freedom. Women’s narratives highlighted the
gendered traumas of slavery and the special obstacles women faced. Families were torn apart, mothers
saw their children taken, women and girls were subject to physical and sexual violence. But post-bellum
narrators also made clear that women were not passive vessels of suffering; rather, they made complex
choices about how best to emotionally and physically navigate their worlds. The long-term effect of those
choices continued to shape women’s lives in freedom, making slavery not just a memory but a living

¹¹ Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 23-25.
presence. In a post-war era in which most whites wanted to either forget the history of slavery altogether or remember it through the romanticized figure of the plantation Mammy, it mattered that formerly enslaved women publicly remembered how slavery challenged their ability to fulfill the roles of wife and mother on their own terms.

Keckley’s narrative challenged readers to complicate their understanding of the female slave experience and the challenges presented to African American womanhood. When Keckley witnesses her parent’s separation and the cold-hearted response of her white mistress, she learns several lessons that will shape her identity, experience, and public persona in the years to come: that one forges connections within slavery at one’s own peril; that whites not only sell and trade slaves like animals but assume they have the emotional development of livestock as well; and that the stoic silence her mother chose may be the only strategy for protecting oneself. The centrality of this event to Keckley’s identity becomes clear when one considers the way she describes and responds to subsequent challenges to her own identity as a woman, wife, and mother. When Keckley is a young woman, she is “given” to a white man who is intent on sexually exploiting her. Keckley’s description of this period in her life, and the child which resulted from this assault, occupies only a few sentences in the space of the narrative: “I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I— I—became a mother. The child of whom he was the father was the only child that I ever brought into the world. If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.”¹² Like Harriet Jacobs, Keckley reminds the reader that one of the travesties of slavery was the mixed meaning it gave to motherhood, turning what might have been a choice and a blessing into a memory of violation and a reminder of continued servitude.

However, unlike Jacobs, Keckley responds to the corruption of her identity as a wife and mother by downplaying the significance of these roles in her life. Some scholars interpret Keckley’s brief treatment of slavery in the narrative as an indication that she was not primarily interested in remembering or representing her experience in bondage. But I think her brief description of sexual vulnerability and motherhood suggests that, even after slavery, Keckley continued to believe that the best strategy for self-preservation was to reveal as little as possible about one’s true feelings. Hence, Keckley’s son – a reminder of how little power she had over her own body in slavery – is a ghost figure, barely present in the narrative. She refers to him in more than passing reference on only three occasions. Keckley spends a great deal of time describing the exaggerated grief of Mary Todd Lincoln at the death of her son and husband, but appends the news of her own son’s death in the Civil War to the end of a chapter like an afterthought. Rather than indicating that Keckley thought her own experience was not as important as Mrs. Lincoln’s, I think that this again suggests she is choosing to turn away from grief “in stoic silence” in order to protect herself from the criticism of those who would trivialize her loss.

Keckley’s literary performance reminded the public that the legacy of slavery which former slaves carried with them was not one of degradation, but of trial and loss. Over the course of her narrative, Keckley recounts the loss of every member of her family: her father, her son, her abuser, her husband, and finally her mother. While her own family has been torn apart one person at a time, the white family which once owned Keckley remained intact. Keckley does not have another child, she does not form a lasting partnership in freedom, she is never reunited with her father, and when she returns South after her mother’s death, she cannot even visit the gravesite because it is unmarked and, as she writes, “to look upon a grave, and not feel certain whose ashes repose beneath the sod, is painful ....” The only connection to the past that Keckley has left at the end of her narrative is the white family that once owned her and she revives this

connection through correspondence and personal visits. Keckley’s reunion with this family – what some scholars have seen as an impulse toward reconciliation and accommodation – is at least partly born of the lasting legacy of loss she has experienced. Returning to them is an attempt to hold on to something of the past that she can recognize. When white friends in D.C. ask Keckley how she can fondly remember those who kept her in bondage, she writes, “The past is a mirror that reflects the chief incidents of my life. To surrender it is to surrender the greatest part of my existence—early impressions, friends, and the graves of my father, my mother, and my son. These people are associated with everything that memory holds dear ....” Keckley’s affection for what she calls her “white family” is born not out of a forgetting of what she suffered under slavery, but out of her remembrance of the people she loved and lost as they lived among these owners of human property.

The reaction to Keckley’s narrative at the time of its publication demonstrates the challenges that post-bellum slave narrators faced in claiming rhetorical authority. Almost all reviewers of Keckley’s narrative focused on her relationship with Mrs. Lincoln and what she revealed about the inner lives of the great man and his wife. Other than identifying her as a former slave, most responses ignored what Keckley had written about her experience of slavery altogether. Many referred to her as a “servant” or “maid” of the Lincoln household, as though to rob her of the distinction she claimed as an independent dress-maker who had mastered an artistic craft. Casting Keckley in a servant role, reviewers were outraged at what she

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18 I found only one contemporary review of the narrative that comments on Keckley’s description of her life in slavery. This reviewer sympathizes with Keckley’s representation of “the brutality and degradation of the peculiar institution” and her impulse to hold those who exploited her accountable by identifying them in print. At the same time, however, the reviewer expresses alarm that servants may feel as at liberty to reveal the secrets of their employers as Keckley does to expose the brutality of her former owners. While many other reviewers criticized Keckley for overstepping the bounds of her place as a servant in the Lincoln household, it is interesting that this writer makes a more explicit connection between the master-slave relationship and the employer-servant dynamic that so often replaced it after emancipation. See “Book Notices,” *New York Herald*, 20 April 1868.
19 See, for example, “Book Notices,” *New York Herald*, 20 April 1868; “Domestic Scandal,” *Flake’s Bulletin* (Galveston, Texas), 26 April 1868; “Table-Talk,” *The Round Table: A Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Society*
seemed to represent: the imminent threat of their own household servants betraying their secrets to the public. “We do not approve of servants publishing books about their employers,” read a review in *Godey’s Lady Book*, “for who will be safe. We may have our own private lives served up by Mary Jane or Susan Sophia.”

Perhaps it is not surprising that so much was made of the “secrets” Keckley revealed about the Lincoln family, but the fact that she was cast, again and again, as a “servant” suggests that her readers were uncomfortable with the new station she claimed for herself as a free woman and attempted to “put her in her place,” if only rhetorically.

The most vicious response to Keckley came in the form of a deeply racist parody that challenged her right to construct her own narrative and sought to remind the public, as well as Keckley, that blackness continued to be a mark of degradation despite slavery’s end. Shortly after the release of Keckley’s memoir, a pamphlet was published entitled “Behind the Seams: By a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis.” The anonymous writer suggested that Keckley was actually the author of the tract and narrated the story in her first person voice. This work represents Keckley as a vain, lazy, immodest, and sexually promiscuous woman who shows as much ingratitude to her former slave owners as she does to

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21 At the same time, however, it is critical to note that Keckley’s performance did, in fact, succeed in changing some people’s opinion of her. In one of the only positive reviews of Keckley’s book, the author writes, “Our first impressions of the book have been greatly modified on reading it. Mrs. Keckley writes with a straightforwardness, a propriety, good sense, and grace and force of diction, that is not a little surprising, and which proves her true womanhood, notwithstanding she was born in slavery and passed thirty years of her life in bondage.” See “Book of the Month,” *Hours at Home: A Popular Monthly of Instruction and Recreation* (New York), June 1868, Volume 7, Issue 2, pg. 187.
22 Naming “Betsey Kickley” the author of the pamphlet served to deny Keckley the respectability of her full first name, Elizabeth, and to suggest her lack of education (she can’t even spell her own name correctly), her illiteracy (in the pamphlet, “Kickley signs her name with an X), and her defrauding of the public (if she is illiterate, the claim that she wrote the narrative herself is clearly false and meant to deceive). *Behind the Seams; By a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis* (New York: National News Company, 1868 [n.p. 1945]), Special Collections, Bollinger Lincoln Collection, University of Iowa Libraries, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. I have thus far only found one press notice of the pamphlet and it provides no further insight into its authorship. See “New Publications,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 5 June 1868.
Mrs. Lincoln by revealing and presumably distorting events within those white households. The gendered aspects of Keckley’s slave experience that I have discussed previously are here condensed, trivialized, and questioned for their veracity. Keckley is represented as self-interested and trying to make money by writing because she does not want to work to support herself. The author has Keckley repeatedly identify herself in racially denigrating terms, as though to constantly mark or reinscribe her blackness. Blackness, clearly associated with the degradation of slavery here, is seen as the one thing Keckley can’t hide after her nominal status changes from slave to free. Slavery may be outlawed and Keckley may be free, but the author insists that blackness is the meaningful marker. Keckley was born with it, as much as with slavery, and the author wants to remind the public, as well as Keckley, that its yoke cannot be slipped.

The response to Keckley’s narrative reveals the incredible risk that Keckley and other post-bellum authors took when they recorded their stories for the public. At the same time, it suggests just how important it was for these African American women to present their own alternative images of slavery and African American womanhood in a nation that continued to see them in terms of the servile and sexualized female slave. By documenting and memorializing their family histories, remembering the gendered traumas of slavery, and demonstrating the lasting impact of the chattel principle on their lives, women writing after the Civil War made a significant contribution to the public debate over race and the memory and legacy of slavery and the Civil War.

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23 The author writes, “...for my own benefit in a pecuniary point of view, as I am hard up, and the pension of eight dollars per month allowed me by ungrateful Uncle Sam, does not suffice to pay my board, even in the little plain room on the fourth floor of No. 14 Carroll Place, I am going to try an experiment and see if I can’t make more money by writing a book than by taking in sewing.” This representation of Keckley as dependent on others for support, taking the government’s assistance for granted, and scheming to avoid “real” work would have been especially meaningful in the first years after emancipation, when former slaves were transitioning to free labor and many whites worried that African Americans would become a dependent population and be unmotivated to work. See *Behind the Seams*, 5.

24 Throughout the pamphlet, the author has “Kickley” constantly identify herself as a “nigger.” The connection between blackness and slavery is reinforced repeatedly, but I offer one example here: “Kickley” writes, “My life has been an eventful one for a nigger, and an ex-slave. I was born a nigger and a slave. My parents were slaves and niggers, and I came upon the earth done up brown, that is to say a dark mulatto.” *Behind the Seams*, 6.