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SANTA CRUZ

MINDING “OUR CICERO”: NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN
AMERICAN WOMEN’S RHETORIC AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE
with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

Heidi Morse

September 2014

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ABSTRACT

Heidi Morse

Minding “Our Cicero”: Nineteenth-Century African American Women’s Rhetoric and the Classical Tradition

Nineteenth-century American culture was rife with references to classical Greco-Roman antiquity, especially in rhetoric, education, and neoclassical visual culture. But the legacy of the classics also had a racialized strain: in “justifications” of slavery and racism, white elites often figured classical erudition as the antithesis to blackness, suggesting, for example, that African Americans did not have the mental capacity to learn Greek or Latin. But despite limited access to the tools and institutions considered essential for educational advancement, African Americans were equal participants in American classicism. The object of this dissertation is to theorize, in particular, African American women’s engagements with classical Greco-Roman legacies in rhetoric and popular culture as syncretic adaptations carried out alongside those of white Americans. As a conceptual reimagining of what the classics meant to nineteenth-century African American women, the dissertation casts “black classicism” from Emancipation through the fin de siècle as a popular cultural phenomenon that surfaces in elementary reading lessons, in the press, and on the lecture platform. In each context, the black female body emerges from a network of neoclassical significations as a powerful source for rhetorical persuasion.

My focus on African American women’s oratory deepens the archive of current scholarship to include ancient treatises by the Roman rhetoricians Cicero and
Quintilian and nineteenth-century printed speeches, newspaper reviews, schoolbooks, photographs, and commemorative poems. The range of sources contextualizes African American women orators’ negotiations of visual paradigms projected onto their bodies—from racist, sexually degrading caricatures to the demure white marble forms of neoclassical sculpture. The first section of the dissertation focuses on the role of the classics in black women’s education and oratory, juxtaposing the war-torn, post-Emancipation 1860s with the Jim Crow 1890s. The second section reads black women’s rhetorical strategies through popular classical emblems, sculptures, and icons in late-nineteenth-century American visual culture. Throughout, I show how African American women ranging from the illiterate ex-slave Sojourner Truth to the Latin teacher Anna Julia Cooper and poet H. Cordelia Ray resisted the disproportionate investment of classical authority in the bodies of white men by performing their classical acumen in ways that promoted racial equality.
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The Institute for Humanities Research at the University of California, Santa Cruz has provided generous financial support for this dissertation through a 2013-14 year fellowship and a 2012 summer fellowship. I have also received support for travel and research from the UCSC Literature Department, the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the UC Humanities Research Institute.

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classicism is an inspiration, helped me by asking the right questions at an early stage in my research. I would like to thank my wonderful dissertation group members, Keegan Finberg and Erica Smeltzer, for commenting on chapter drafts and believing in their future potential.

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INTRODUCTION

Sojourner Truth, the iconic African American woman orator of the nineteenth century, once compared her speech at a Massachusetts antislavery gathering to that of the white abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who spoke after her, in the following manner: “I was utterly astonished to hear him say, ‘Well has Sojourner said so and so’; and I said to myself, Lord, did I say that? How differently it sounded coming from his lips! He dressed my poor, bare speech in such beautiful garments that I scarcely recognized it myself” (310-11). Phillips, a skilled extemporaneous speaker trained in classical rhetoric, had delivered a lecture based on a few points from Truth’s preceding presentation, which—according to a secondhand report published years later—included a song titled “Hail! ye abolitionists” and a number of “witty sallies and pathetic appeals” that had “moved the audience to laughter and tears” (310). Little else is known about the contents of either lecture, but Truth’s characterization of Phillips’s adornment of her “poor, bare speech” with “beautiful garments” underscores perceived distances between the rhetorical authority of the two speakers in 1850s America, as well as Truth’s strategic management of these distances. At the time, oratorical eloquence was considered a direct product of education in classical Greek and Latin languages (so as to read the masters such as the Roman orator Cicero) and years of elocutionary vocal training. Phillips’s “beautiful garments,” as Truth put it, were not simply the phrasings of a practiced speaker, as Truth was, they

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1 This report was written and printed by Truth’s friend and editor, Frances Titus, in the 1878 edition of the Narrative of Sojourner Truth.
were the rhetorical embellishments of a member of the social elite, a white man trained in the classics.

Truth’s performance had a powerful effect on the audience—perhaps even more so than Phillips’s “eloquent” speech—but her lack of formal rhetorical training, beginning with her inability to read or write, excluded her from the social authority Phillips could command. William Lloyd Garrison, for example, introduced Truth by saying, “Sojourner Truth will now address you in her peculiar manner,” whereas Truth introduced Phillips by saying, “I will now close, for he that cometh after me is greater than I” (310). This form of rhetorical differentiation—which Truth later playfully exaggerates in the image of Phillips dressing up her “bare speech”—operated in tandem with discriminations based on her status as a black woman and former slave: in the nineteenth-century U.S., advocates of slavery often “justified” the practice with claims of inferior black intellectual capacity, even as African Americans, especially slaves, were routinely denied access to the tools and institutions considered essential for educational advancement. Emancipation, first enacted in 1863 and enforced in law by 1865, fundamentally expanded opportunities for African American education and civic engagement, but despite these gains the social construction of blackness as the antithesis of classical erudition persisted as a form of social backlash well beyond Reconstruction.

The object of the present study is to show how African American speakers and writers—ranging from the illiterate ex-slave Sojourner Truth to elementary learners to the classically educated theorist Anna Julia Cooper and poet Henrietta
Cordelia Ray—reimagined the relationship between rhetoric and “race” in the decades following Emancipation in ways that capitalized on their own levels of engagement with the classics. Highlighting the role of women in redefining post-Emancipation black rhetoric pushes beyond the cultural narrative of African American intellectual history that tends to move from one male figurehead to the next. Current overviews often skip from the famed mid-nineteenth-century orator and author Frederick Douglass to the educational debates of the early twentieth century, often represented as a polarized battle between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. In the intervening years, African American women’s strategic receptions of ancient Roman rhetorical models and cultural legacies helped alter the racialized trajectory of American classicism by undermining its monopolization by white male elites as a measure for intellectual and cultural superiority. Truth, for example, played up rhetorical successes achieved without the advantages of a classical education, such as that encoded above in Phillips’s reported assessment, “Well has Sojourner said so and so.” The “beautiful garments” Truth claims to have “scarcely recognized” in Phillips’s reprise of her lecture are marked as merely decorative additions to a speech whose body remains her own. Other women such as Cooper and Ray resisted the disproportionate investment of classical authority in the bodies of white men by performing their own expertise in ways that advanced, rather than detracted from, racial autonomy and social equality.
I. Black Orators, Roman Orators

Readers might wonder at the choice of pairing classical rhetoric and its legacy in the nineteenth-century U.S. with African American women’s rhetoric and public speaking. Scholarship on well-known African American women orators of the post-Emancipation period such as Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Anna Julia Cooper has often theorized their rhetorical successes as part of a specifically African American oral tradition understood as a constellation of practices including preaching, singing, and signifying—not as participating in classical rhetorical legacies, which have often been considered a part of “white” culture. But such a cohesive analytical methodology is reflective not so much of nineteenth-century black rhetorical practices as of African American literary and critical self-definition spearheaded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the 1980s. For Gates and others of his generation, twentieth-century authors and works featuring dialect like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* become optics for reclaiming and theorizing a continuous African American oral tradition stretching from the Middle Passage to the present. Under this critical lens, of the above-named orators Truth

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2 For Truth, the least formally educated of the above-named orators, this characterization of participating exclusively in black oral culture is especially prevalent, while for Cooper, who is known for her classical training, it is less marked.

3 As Leon Jackson explains, “Beginning in the 1980s, a cohort of scholars, including Robert Stepto, Houston Baker, Barbara Johnson, and Gates…. used blues, jazz, and the vernacular as aesthetic models through which to read African American literature,” a “peculiarly formalist” way of reading African American literature “through its own self-representations” (256). New directions in defining the scope and methodology of African American literary studies—particularly whether the “canon” can be conceived of as “continuous” at all—have been catalyzed by Kenneth W. Warren’s recent book *What Was African American Literature?* (2011).
becomes the most “authentic” representative of African American culture because her speech patterns—which, I might add, come to us only in mediated form—“sound” like the precedent Gates and others are looking for.⁴

Nineteenth-century African American rhetoric, however, was not limited to any single mode of speaking or signifying. The orators named above all regularly addressed white and mixed-race audiences, as well as black audiences, and took advantage of an array of rhetorical strategies available to them. Among these choices were styles of elocution and argumentation adapted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans from classical Greek and Roman orators and rhetoricians such as Cicero, Quintilian, and Demosthenes. Teachers, textbook authors, and newspaper reviewers frequently invoked these ancient names in the post-Revolutionary period as the “new” American republic looked back to classical antiquity—and especially the Roman republic—for inspirational models of citizenship and political engagement. Because classical legacies pervaded everyday American rhetoric, education, and visual culture—including the very embodiment of the nation in the neoclassical figure of “Columbia”—it would be inauthentic to consider African American rhetoric as wholly separate from the classics.

Portraying the classical tradition as not a part of the experience of formerly enslaved or colonized peoples only perpetuates the elitism historically imbued in the classics by those in power. My focus, therefore, is on moments of creative

⁴ Truth’s dialect was actually influenced by Low Dutch, which she spoke as a child in New York, not by Southern dialect as many reporters and transcribers suggested in their spelling—a misrepresentation that continues today, especially in popular representations of Truth’s life (Painter 7).
adaptations of classical legacies in rhetoric and popular culture undertaken by African Americans not as a means of proving black humanity to white audiences (as per the parameters set by racist elites), but rather as gateways for the improvement of African American education and sociopolitical opportunity. In this analytical mode, I consider African American uses of and responses to “the classics”—i.e. ancient Greek and Roman literature, rhetoric, and culture and their legacies—as syncretic adaptations carried out alongside those of white Americans. Claims of the purported “European-ness” of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and charges against black scholars of Greek and Latin as “imitators” and “parrots” notwithstanding, no American could authentically claim the classics as his or her own.

In response to V.S. Naipaul’s diagnosis of mimicry, or imitation, as endemic to Caribbean culture, Derek Walcott writes that “it is not, to my mind, only the West Indies which is being insulted by Naipaul, but all endeavor in this half of the world, in broader definition: the American endeavor” (6). In other words, New World immigrants, whether European, African, or Asian, are all equally subject to charges of cultural dependency on the Old World. The specter of mimicry disproportionately affected enslaved and colonized peoples because Europeans deployed it as a form of cultural superiority even as they themselves were “imitators” par excellence of classical culture from the Renaissance forward. Postcolonial theorists’ reclaiming of mimicry as “an act of imagination” and resistance, therefore, offers a paradigm for reading African American engagements with classical rhetorical legacies as sites of
radical creative potential, rather than cultural derivativeness (Walcott 10). The emerging field of “black classicism,” within which I situate my own work, takes as its premise the fact that African-descended people have “contributed richly to the very classical tradition with which it was suspected that there could only be a relationship of mimetic dependency” (Greenwood 109).

My analysis of nineteenth-century African American women’s classicism(s) builds on the burgeoning interdisciplinary dialogue between the fields of African American studies and classical receptions. Black classicism (also known as “Classica Africana”) as a field of study takes as its objects modern adaptations of ancient Greek and Roman literature and classical language study by African and African-descended peoples. An early catalyst for the development of the field was the debate over the topic of race in antiquity, spurred especially by Martin Bernal’s controversial publication Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (1987). Bernal sought to recover African and Asiatic linguistic and cultural influences on ancient Greece, arguing that European historians of the modern era had whitewashed classical history. His broad-sweeping interdisciplinary methods faced immediate critique from the classicist Mary Lefkowitz and others, including the African American classicist Frank M. Snowden, who published two monographs—Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience (1970) and Before Color

See also Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817” (1985).

Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks (1991)—refuting the idea that “race” or racial prejudice operated in classical antiquity as they do in the modern era. The ensuing debates pitted classicists against Afrocentrists, with Lefkowitz and Snowden dismissing the latter’s search for the cultural origins of Western civilization in Africa (for example, via the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia) as more reflective of pan-African politics than historical accuracy.7

The disparity in method and motive between the two camps has been remediated by twenty-first-century scholarship focusing on black classical receptions, with the emphasis on reception designating a shift away from conceptual divisions between African American studies and classical studies and toward collaborative or interdisciplinary work researching black classical language study and literary adaptations in the modern era. In 2005, Michele Valerie Ronnick’s publication of The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough, a nineteenth-century African American classicist, helped turn the conversation toward classical receptions by bringing to light historical instances of the classics being used to advance African American cultural agendas. Besides achieving notoriety for his publication of First Lessons in Greek (1881), the first Greek textbook published by an African American, Scarborough promoted collaborations between classicists and scholars of African

7 Emily Greenwood argues that in the context of postcolonial literature and theory, as in African American studies, the polarity of these debates prevented real dialogue between scholars of Afro-Caribbean literature and classicists: “The phoney cultural war between an African-oriented literature and a European one has distracted critics from the fact that, in the twentieth century, several anglophone Caribbean writers contributed richly to the very classical tradition with which it was suspected that there could only be a relationship of mimetic dependency” (109).
history, suggesting that classical philologists might help “throw more light upon
Africa’s past history” (58).

Recent surveys such as Tracey L. Walters’s *African American Literature and
the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (2007)
and William W. Cook and James Tatum’s *African American Writers and the
Classical Tradition* (2010) have built on Ronnick’s premise. However, as the
constellation of figures—from Phillis Wheatley to Frederick Douglass, William
Morrison—examined in these surveys attests, scholarship in black classicism has thus
far underrepresented African Americans who did not have access to classical
language training. In the nineteenth-century context, this elision disproportionately
affects black women. By the same token, authors have been studied far more
extensively than orators, perpetuating an artificial divide between studies of black
classicism and of African American oral and folk culture. Frederick Douglass—who
did not read Greek or Latin, but taught himself to speak in a classical style—remains
the primary exception to critics’ disproportionate focus on classically educated
authors, and often serves as the sole intermediary figure between the eighteenth-
century classical “prodigy” Wheatley and the late nineteenth-century cluster of black
authors who benefited from increasing access to classical education. In part as a

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8 Other important scholarship on black classicism in the Americas focuses on the
twentieth century, for example Patrice D. Rankine’s *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison,
Classicism, and African American Literature* (2006) and Emily Greenwood’s *Afro-
Greeks: Dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the
Twentieth Century* (2010).
conceptual reimagining of what the classics meant to Douglass’s black female contemporaries, the present study recasts black classicism from Emancipation through the fin de siècle as a popular cultural phenomenon that surfaces not only in literature but also in elementary reading lessons, in the press, and on the lecture platform.

Caroline Winterer has designated the term “culture of classicism” as a catch-all for the ubiquity of classical references and influences in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American life. In *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (2002) and especially *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (2007), Winterer presents an array of everyday contexts for classicism—from education and visual culture, including neoclassical sculpture and printed graphics, to newspapers, home decoration, and dramatic performance—that suggest a breadth of American fascination with ancient Greece and Rome previously unrealized by rhetorical or literary investigations. Winterer’s concept of the “culture of classicism,” considered jointly with publications by art and cultural historians, such as Joy S. Kasson’s *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (1990) and Marcus Wood’s *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (2000), opens up a mode of reading classical emblems and icons in nineteenth-century American visual culture as a counterpoint to studies of black classicism that remain tied to language and literary study. African American women orators had to negotiate visual paradigms projected onto women’s
bodies ranging from racist, sexually degrading caricatures to the demure white marble forms of neoclassical sculpture. In the performative context of public speaking, visual culture is an equally important sphere of classical influence as rhetoric.

Scholars of African American women’s rhetoric and performance studies have been theorizing for quite some time just what it meant for a nineteenth-century black woman or mixed-race woman to stand up and speak in public. In “Doers of the Word”: African-American Women Writers and Speakers in the North (1830-1880) (1995), Carla L. Peterson explains that women speaking in public were often characterized as unruly and “the black woman’s body was always envisioned as public and exposed” via stereotypes of sexual availability and of the laboring body (20). As such, black women orators often occupied “liminal spaces” in society, adapting their rhetoric to perform both insider and outsider subject positions (Peterson 17). Physical presence constituted an unavoidable barrier and opportunity for women whose bodies signified difference. As Shirley Wilson Logan observes in “We Are Coming”: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women (1999), “The general response of white audiences to the very presence of intelligent, articulate black women was often much stronger than their response to anything the women had to say” (22). While such reactions threatened to devalue their words, paradoxically, their very public visibility could also render these speakers “the embodiment of their message” for racial and gender equality (22). In Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 (2006), Daphne A. Brooks flips the script of embodied performance by suggesting that African
American women orators and actors disrupted audiences’ expectations and resisted visual legibility by acting out ambiguous or multiple racial and gendered positions in performances of “spectacular opacity” (8).

These various diagnoses of the intersections between bodily significations and rhetorical performance all have in common a recognition of the hypervisual mode of audiences’ assessments of black women’s oratory, and orators’ awareness of that fact. My addition to the work of Peterson, Logan, and Brooks is to suggest that these back-and-forth visual re-significations between audience and orator, which in the nineteenth century have a clear racial dimension, are a form of currency with historical roots in classical Greek and Roman rhetorical practice. Roman orators like Cicero performed rhetorical authority in bodily and vocal cues that can be traced today both through verbal references in extant speeches and through rhetorical treatises like Cicero’s 55 BCE de Oratore (On the Orator) and Quintilian’s 95 CE Institutio Oratoria (Institutes of Oratory). In judicial, deliberative, and epideictic (commemorative) oratory, the skilled Roman orator, who was always a male citizen, used his body as a point of reference to enact, and sometimes—as Brook argues in the context of African American women’s performances—disrupt, audiences’ judgments, guiding their perceptions through an overlapping spectacle of bodily comportment and verbal argumentation.

Another point of confluence between investigations of African American and ancient Roman oratory is the importance of voice to both endeavors. A powerful and clear speaking voice was essential for the orator to be heard in the Roman forum or
courtroom, as well as in American meeting halls. But beyond these practical measures voices were also perceived by auditors as marked by gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Roman and American orators educated at the most reputable institutions trained their voices to the standards of Roman Latin (not a foreigner’s accents) and New England American English (not Southern dialect). Despite the fact that such training belies the “eloquent” voice’s performance of innate or identity-based value, nineteenth-century American auditors still often believed they could “hear” race—an exercise that was, of course, as fallible as visual discernment. Alex W. Black observes that “Elocution tries to give the impression that it is unmarked speech,” just like whiteness was socially constructed as “unmarked” in opposition to supposed signifiers of blackness during the intense racial demarcations of the nineteenth century (631). In an important addition to Brooks’s work on bodily (il)legibility, Black describes the nineteenth-century African American performer’s “resonant body” as a synesthetic aural-visual hybrid managing equally audiences’ perceptions of voice as well as of bodily features (620).

Beginning in the 1990s with the rise of gender and queer studies, classicists began to pay increasing attention to the gendering of the body and voice that accompanied certain kinds of public performance in ancient Greece and Rome.⁹ Scholarship in this area offers productive parallels with studies of performance in ancient Greece and Rome.⁹

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⁹ Scholarship in ancient Greek and Roman gender, sexuality, and embodiment was catalyzed especially by the theoretical work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler. See, for example, Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World (1990), edited by David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, and Roman Sexualities (1997), edited by Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner.
modern contexts, and especially in nineteenth-century American rhetoric, which in its institutionalized form was directly inspired by the oratory of the ancient Roman republic. In *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (2000), Eric Gunderson argues that the practice of Roman oratory doubled as a performance of self-mastery and masculine virtue. He explains the socially constructed nature of this form of bodily training and performance: “As many scholars of gender and sexuality have noted, Cicero and Quintilian are policemen of behavior and style, encouraging students to cultivate a ‘naturally’ masculine attitude, and punishing those who had the look and sound of the slave, the foreigner, the ill-educated man, or the woman” (“The rhetoric of rhetorical theory” 135). Similarly, in *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (2007), Joy Connolly shapes her analysis of Roman constructions of civic identity around Cicero’s belief that it is “the orator’s knowledge of his body and the bodies of his listeners” that secures his status, above and beyond his verbal persuasions (134). In these readings, the Roman orator’s body, like that of the African American woman orator, is literally a site of and for public interpretation—a kind of text—that is subject to judgment at the same time as it is capable of shaping public opinion through performative acts of (re)signification.

Both classicists and scholars of African American history and culture have in common the methodological dilemmas of working with a limited archive of written materials, many of which are substantially mediated. In the nineteenth-century U.S., the ancient Roman rhetorical texts examined in the following chapters—Quintilian’s
Institutio Oratoria and Cicero’s de Oratore—were already well known, but other archaeological artifacts and ruins from antiquity were just being discovered, for example, the Venus de Milo was found in 1820, and Pompeii and Herculaneum were being thoroughly excavated in the 1860s. These discoveries from ancient Greece and Rome were coming to light at just the same time as many details of African American everyday life went unrecorded or were buried in institutional records like slaveholders’ account books, “runaway” slave advertisements or other newspaper articles, and reports of governmental organizations like the Freedmen’s Bureau.

While wealthy nineteenth-century Americans flocked to Pompeii to look at rediscovered artifacts from ancient Romans’ everyday lives, today scholars must piece together fragmented narratives of African American history from archives that are equally enigmatic.

When it comes to tracking down information about nineteenth-century African American women’s oratorical performances, printed texts—and, where available, photographs or engravings—are the primary sources. The general trend in scholarship on black classicism has been to read and compare literary texts from antiquity with those of modern authors, and in some cases to research biographical and educational data on black classicists like Scarborough. My focus on rhetoric deepens the archive to include ancient rhetorical treatises on the one hand, and, on the other, printed speeches, newspaper reviews, schoolbooks, photographs, and commemorative poems produced during a period in which the rise of technologies for mass printing—and the concomitant rise of a reading public—precipitated the
increased intermingling of printed texts with American oratorical culture. These texts help extend the study of black classicism into popular and everyday contexts.

Methodologically, then, my research builds on existing scholarship in African American print culture studies, which analyzes the conditions of production and circulation of printed texts as clues to the everyday contexts of reading, learning, and communicating taking place in and around them.\(^\text{10}\) Using printed texts as resources for analyzing oratorical performance is one way of suturing over the “rift” between what Diana Taylor has called “the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19, emphases in original). Complicating this usual mode, my analysis also seeks to uncover moments where the influence of printed materials on performance—particularly oratorical speech—is in evidence, whether in schoolbook exercises performed aloud or extemporaneous spoken riffs on newspaper reviews and stereotypes. Reading for echoes of nineteenth-century print culture in performance, and vice versa, resists adherence to divisions between oral and written culture in African American literary criticism and history, taking its cue from other studies of

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“hybrid” practices. Shirley Wilson Logan’s *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America* (2008), Elizabeth McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002), and Eric Gardner’s *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2009) are all exemplary studies of “sites” of learning and communicating in which print circulation acts in concert with similarly regular practices of oral transmission, such as in literary societies with a blended range of readers and non-readers.

By pairing the figures of the Roman orator and the black woman orator, the dissertation extends the archive and methodological parameters of black classicism, and also offers to African American studies a reading of nineteenth-century classical rhetorical contexts that foregrounds, rather than excludes, black subjects.

II. Overview of Chapters

*Minding “Our Cicero”* addresses two main trajectories of nineteenth-century African American engagement with rhetorical legacies of ancient Greece and Rome. The first two chapters focus on the role of the classics—particularly the rhetorical treatises of Quintilian and Cicero—in African American education from the Civil War to the turn of the century. The argument juxtaposes the first moments of post-Emancipation access to elementary education for many former slaves with the following decades of increasing availability of higher education including classical languages and rhetoric. The role of the black orator-in-training in the changing nation
is at stake in each context, from the war-torn, post-Emancipation 1860s to the Jim Crow 1890s. The final two chapters shift the classical lens away from rhetorical education and toward visual and cultural legacies of antiquity, particularly classical and neoclassical sculpture and monument, as they relate to the rhetorical choices of the orator. Again juxtaposing the imagined futures of Emancipation with their negative images in lynchings and racial violence at the turn of the century, these chapters show how African American women used classical references as vehicles for the anticipation, commemoration, and negotiation of their own role in racial history.

Chapter One, “Black imitatio: Quintilian’s Pedagogical Legacy and Freedpeople’s Schoolbooks,” opens with a set of pedagogical practices that has been overlooked in present studies of black classicism and of African American rhetorics: that of elementary education in black communities in the Civil War and post-Emancipation South. For research in this area, scholars have traditionally analyzed schoolbooks written for freedpeople, such as the evangelical American Tract Society’s Freedman’s series, which directed students’ attention to the goal of reading the Bible. However, secondhand schoolbooks donated from Northern philanthropists were both more plentiful in freedpeople’s schools and more versatile, offering classical pedagogical models emphasizing public speaking that were common in early-nineteenth-century American education. American rhetorical anthologies such as Caleb Bingham’s The Columbian Orator (1797) opened with anecdotes about Demosthenes or advice gleaned from Quintilian and included classical speeches, while elementary schoolbooks such as Noah Webster’s Elementary Spelling Book
which were crucial for literacy instruction—laid the groundwork for training the voice through exercises in pronunciation that echoed those of ancient Roman students.

African American learners took advantage of elementary lessons in elocution and public speaking, derived from Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* (95 CE), by integrating them with oral practices of self-teaching and peer teaching. For example, a few lessons with Webster’s speller and mastery of the recitation of the syllable tables enabled learners to become teachers by repeating lessons aloud and passing them along informally—a practice that democratized who counted as an exemplary teacher. The recirculation of Webster’s speller and other early nationalist schoolbooks in the post-Emancipation South thus catalyzed a resurgence—and repurposing—among black students of pedagogical strategies inspired by classical rhetorical education that, decades before, had been used in predominantly white American classrooms. Though literacy is the dominant trope in histories of nineteenth-century African American education, facility in oral recitation and public speaking proved an equally valuable skill for freed African Americans at this crucial post-Emancipation juncture. Because American civic engagement at this time was predicated on oratorical skill, the pedagogical tools encoded in classical rhetorical lessons offered a pathway to performing black citizenship in a way that was legible to its detractors. The cultivation of practices of self-teaching by adapting classical rhetorical models set a trend for the continuing importance of the classics to black education in the coming decades.
Widespread establishment of normal schools and colleges for the training of black teachers in the late 1860s through 1870s made instruction in classical languages and rhetoric more accessible, triggering fierce backlash and debate regarding the relevance of the classics to racial uplift in the following decades. Chapter Two, “Figural Rhetoric: Anna Julia Cooper’s Ciceronian Transformations,” analyzes a black woman’s intervention in this debate, showing how Anna Julia Cooper, a Latin teacher and public intellectual, exemplifies the utility of the classics by adapting rhetorical models from Cicero’s *de Oratore* (55 BCE) in her persuasive advocacy for African American women’s higher education. Cooper’s *A Voice From the South* (1892) is a sophisticated theoretical analysis of race and gender in the late nineteenth century that champions the figure of the black woman teacher, orator, and classical scholar as a talented leader of the race equally alongside male intellectuals. While black men like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois could rely on gendered, if not racial, authority in their oratory and rhetoric—a legacy passed down from antiquity—Cooper argued that women, too, could wield rhetorical power.

For Cicero, the male orator’s body—so long as it was naturally vigorous, healthy, and unambiguously Roman in appearance and speech—operated as a legitimizing tool for rhetorical persuasion. In many examples from *de Oratore* and from Cicero’s own career, the Roman orator rests his argument on a performance of bodily authority (which Cicero terms an ideal “conformatio,” or “configuration” of voice and physical features) that contrasts with the allegedly deficient bodily characteristics (ethnic or otherwise) of legal opponents and witnesses whose
testimony he wishes to cast as insincere. Echoes of Cicero’s physical demarcation of persuasive versus unpersuasive orators can be seen in the hostile challenges to their authority African American women orators faced when addressing predominantly white or male audiences. This chapter shows how Cooper, well versed in classical rhetoric, appropriated Cicero’s linkage between body, voice, and rhetorical persuasiveness to highlight her classical rhetorical acumen, redeploying Ciceronian figures of speech as tools for legitimizing her body—and those of other black women—to audiences. Cooper’s adapted strategies include using prosopopoeia and anecdote to validate the embodied persona of the “Black Woman of the South,” and, as her title *A Voice From the South* suggests, using the symbolic value of “voice” as metonymic shorthand for encoding black women’s valuable contributions to oratory, education, and uplift.

Outside the classroom, too, the nineteenth-century U.S. “culture of classicism” infused neoclassical sculpture, national expositions, printed media, and popular advertisement and performance. The widespread popularity of the classics in visual culture influenced public perceptions of black women’s oratory. For example, starting in 1863, Sojourner Truth was advertised in the white press as the “Libyan Sibyl,” a classical epithet inspired by William Wetmore Story’s 1860 neoclassical sculpture of the same name. The comparison, first proposed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, boosted Truth’s iconicity at the same time as it exoticized this American-born activist and orator. Chapter Three, “The ‘Libyan Sibyl’: Sojourner Truth, Race, and the Neoclassical Body,” argues that, while Truth did not fully embrace the nickname,
she choreographed the effects of the “sibyl” comparison to position herself as an American icon. Story’s neoclassical sculpture depicted the brooding figure of a woman understood as one of the ten famous prophetic female sibyls of antiquity hailing from different regions, in this case northern Africa. Stowe’s comparison of Truth to Story’s well-known sculpture suggested a metaphorical kinship between Truth as an antislavery advocate “predicting” Emancipation and nineteenth-century popular conceptions of classical sibyls and oracles.

The racial implications of the “Libyan Sibyl” sobriquet—which also appeared in other permutations including “the African sibyl,” the “sable sibyl,” and “the colored American Sibyl”—were strong: many nineteenth-century Americans would have understood the ancient geographical modifier “Libyan” as a symbol for black Africa, projecting nineteenth-century racial categories backward onto antiquity. But the medium of neoclassical sculpture, which was frequently rendered in white marble, also provided a visual paradigm of ideal female embodiment that sidestepped degrading or hyper-sexualized depictions of black women’s bodies in the press. Playing off all these cultural registers, Truth transformed the sibyl icon into a cultivated association with Columbia, the neoclassical goddess personifying the American nation. Columbia appeared frequently in printed cartoons and patriotic artwork; during the Civil War she even took on the role of the national oracle. Truth strategically utilized Columbia’s iconography in performative and rhetorical contexts, for example in the incorporation of emblems such as the stars and stripes in her clothing, and in her claim to be as old as the American century, born in 1776. Her re-
narration of the prophetic sibyl motif in her oratory brings to light a rich archive of encoded neoclassical aesthetics in her own self-representations, and a very different mode of black classicism from Anna Julia Cooper’s Ciceronian rhetoric.

While Sojourner Truth’s performative embodiments of the “Libyan Sibyl” and the national oracle “Columbia” situated her in a mode of prophetic anticipation characteristic of the 1860s, when African Americans looked forward to a future without slavery, social backlash in following decades triggered a corresponding adjustment in black rhetoric towards an increasingly retrospective mode. The end of the nineteenth century also represented a shift in contexts for public speaking, traceable through the emergence of elaborate public expositions and commemorative occasions that paired speeches, poetry, and song with visual displays. Chapter Four, “Classical Pasts, Racial Futures: The Poetic Echoes of Cordelia Ray,” reads one such occasion—the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument in 1876, which was punctuated by Ray’s commemorative ode “Lincoln”—alongside a corpus of commemorative poetry that reverberated with the voices of African American orators, committing them to lasting public memory. Ray’s poems mourn the passing of great orators such as Frederick Douglass, whom she calls “Our Cicero,” and the failures of Reconstruction, even as they press for renewed racial advocacy. For example, rather than extolling Thomas Ball’s Freedmen’s Monument, which embedded racial hierarchies in its depiction of Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator” standing over a crouching freedman, Ray’s ode “Lincoln” imagines a corresponding metaphorical monument to freedom, indicating a national responsibility to remember Emancipation
for the radical potential of improved race relations that it had offered—a vision that was increasingly at risk at the end of Reconstruction.

Examination of other classically inspired poems from the 1890s and following such as “The Venus of Milo,” “Echo’s Complaint,” and “Niobe” shows how Ray’s poetic significations speak to the capaciousness of the nineteenth-century “culture of classicism,” beginning with the theme of remembering the classical past through excavated or recovered objects (especially sculptures), and ending with a focus on remembered voices—classical and modern—as embedded flashbacks that construct African American cultural memory. Taken together, Ray’s classical allusions and commemorative poems, especially those to Douglass and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, function as community-building tools that present African Americans as rightful and equal inheritors of the literature and culture of classical antiquity. Vocalized echoes of both ancient Greco-Roman and recent African American figures in Ray’s poetry at this transitional moment carry over the principles—and potential—of nineteenth-century black classicism into the twentieth century.

The dissertation’s title, Minding “Our Cicero,” is both a recapitulation of Ray’s gloss on Frederick Douglass as “Our Cicero”—a black Cicero—and a phrase that recasts “Our Cicero” as a collective arsenal of black women’s rhetorical strategies, from expertise in Greek and Latin to performative evocations of classical references. Retaining a double valence of “minding” as “obeying” and “attending to,” Minding “Our Cicero” represents both nineteenth-century rhetorical imperatives and African American women orators’ radical responses to the cultural hegemony
Cicero had come to represent. The adjectival modifier, “Our,” paired with a classical reference, also echoes other representations of black classicism in nineteenth-century discourse and critical scholarship today. For nineteenth-century Americans such pairings included, to name only a few, Sojourner Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl,” Phillis Wheatley as the “sable muse,” and one missionary teacher’s identification of freedpeople as “our sable scholars.” Today, “black classicism” as a field designation stems from provocative book titles such as *Black Athena*, *Ulysses in Black*, and *Afro-Greeks*. What was once emphatically a demarcation of racial difference and, possibly, cultural derivativeness emerges in reclaims such as Ray’s “Our Cicero” as a protean signifier of the cultural capaciousness of classical Greek and Roman inheritances. Attending to such moments of “claiming” the classics in popular cultural institutions such as oratory, education, print circulation, and visual culture brings to light a rich history of black classical adaptations as the rule, rather than the exception, in nineteenth-century black America.
CHAPTER ONE

Black *imitatio*: Quintilian’s Pedagogical Legacy and Freedpeople’s Schoolbooks

And when did Greece or Rome present a fairer field for eloquence than that which now invites the culture of the enlightened citizens of Columbia? –Joseph Perkins¹

In absence of other teaching they are determined to be self-taught; and everywhere some elementary textbook, or the fragment of one may be seen in the hands of negroes. –John W. Alvord²

“The ab-o-li-tion of slave-ry has made an al-ter-a-tion in the con-di-tion of the freed-men, and laid up-on them cor-res-pond-ing du-ties,” students read in Lesson 185 of the American Tract Society’s *The Freedman’s Spelling Book* (85). This was just one of many lessons combining instruction in social expectations with educational content—in this case words with “accent on the third syllable”—in nineteenth-century American schoolbooks, but it highlights an important question at stake in the contentious debates over African American education after Emancipation. What role would “the freedman” play in this newly non-slaveholding American republic? Would he (rarely “she” in this kind of rhetoric) perform the “du-ties” of a subjugated laboring class, or those of an equally entitled citizenry? As historian Mary Niall Mitchell observes, “Struggles over the meaning of freedom—that is, over what slave emancipation would mean in practice—were attempts to spell out what *should*

¹ Excerpt from Perkins’ 1794 Commencement address at Harvard University, “Oration on Eloquence,” reprinted in Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator* (33).
² Excerpt from Alvord’s report to General O.O. Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, after his 1865 tour of schools in the south as General Superintendent of Schools for the bureau (qtd. in Williams 81).
be” (5, emphasis in original). No sphere was more fraught with tension over diverging expectations for the future of emancipated African Americans than that of education—as evidenced, for example, by the disparity between exploitative employers (many former slaveholders) who preferred they have no schooling at all and the concerted labor of missionary teachers and organizations like the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association to teach them, at the minimum, to read and write. Underlying vociferous public debates and accompanying actions, however, were the individual and communal efforts of freedpeople to take charge of their own learning and vindicate their right to full citizenship, an enterprise supported by the new availability of schoolbooks.

Formerly enslaved African Americans entered into a new relationship to printed texts in the 1860s; whereas during slavery many states’ slave codes forbade slaves from learning to read or write, the Union army’s advance southward and the celebrated Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 triggered a widespread turn among freedpeople toward visible educational activities and acquisition of printed materials. This transitional period in which freedpeople of all ages were learning to read—lasting approximately through 1872, when the Freedmen’s Bureau was disbanded—constitutes an important scene of engagement with American classicism. Scholarship on freedpeople’s schoolbooks in the post-Emancipation South has so far focused on texts specifically commissioned for their use, such as the evangelical American Tract Society’s *Freedman’s* series, which envisioned freedpeople’s “du-ties” primarily as a
set of moral and social guidelines and focused on the goal of reading the Bible.\textsuperscript{3} However, donations of secondhand schoolbooks from the North arrived in even greater numbers, making available a set of pedagogical practices emphasizing public speaking and classical rhetorical legacies common in early-nineteenth-century American education that were not reflected in books written for freedpeople. The lasting impact of these mainstream early republican schoolbooks on freedpeople’s education merits equal scholarly attention. For example, a ubiquitous—but understudied—tool for freedpeople’s literacy training was Noah Webster’s 1841 *Elementary Spelling Book*, which in Northern schools had often been paired with elocutionary handbooks such as *The Columbian Orator, The American Elocutionist*, and *The United States Speaker*. Secondhand recirculation of Webster’s speller and other such materials in the post-Emancipation South engineered the transferal of principles of classical rhetorical education widespread in early nationalist schoolbooks to African American learners at a crucial historical juncture: at the close

of the Civil War, it was not just literacy that was at stake, but the future of African American civic engagement, which at this time was still inextricably tied to oratorical skill. How, this chapter will ask, did African American learners adapt earlier texts intended for white audiences for their distinctive situation?

The pedagogical influence of the Roman rhetorician Quintilian had resurfaced in the U.S. in the post-Revolutionary period as comparisons to ancient Rome—in which the citizen-orator reigned supreme—and the “new” republic inspired a wave of texts drawing on classical precepts for the training of a new generation of citizens. In mainstream schoolbooks circulating in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a classically inspired rhetoric of civic engagement was intended to bolster the reputation of its recipients as well as the nation as a whole. Secular spellers and primers written for elementary learners focused on building skills for oral recitation, and textbooks and elocutionary exercises intended particularly for boys and young men in New England schools and universities encouraged vocal participation in the public sphere and fostered a culture of popular oratory in the form of local reading and literary societies and the lyceum circuit. The legacy of Quintilian’s principles for the orator’s education embedded in secondhand schoolbooks represented, for

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many African American learners, a pathway to engaged citizenship and political representation.

Scholars have begun to document African Americans’ engagements with elocutionary and classical rhetorical texts in early-nineteenth-century literary societies, and many have noted Frederick Douglass’s account of reading Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator* while still enslaved circa 1830, but none have considered the role of elocution in elementary education and self-teaching in the post-Emancipation South. To address this lacuna, I will show how Quintilianic pedagogical principles encoded in elementary lessons and schoolbooks supported practices of self-teaching and participatory civic engagement among freedpeople. In Quintilian’s pedagogical model of *imitatio*, which resonated through elementary as well as advanced rhetorical education, Roman students mimicked the best elements of exemplary oratorical models. Formerly enslaved African Americans utilized a similar model of learning by example, but instead of privileging the highly trained classical teacher, freedpeople of all educational levels used established routes of oral transmission to pass along lessons to friends and family, repeating letters, syllables, and words back to one another in a radical transformation of pedagogical authority.

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This trans-historical analogy is not intended to reduce an innovative method of freedpeople’s self-teaching via spoken sharing of schoolroom and schoolbook lessons to a classical “precedent.” Rather, classical rhetoric was an essential component of Anglo-American pedagogy, and as such it provided educational models readily adapted and modified without premeditation about the politics of “copy” versus “original.” At a time when elocutionary education had become synonymous with upward mobility, African American learners in the post-Emancipation South revitalized the flexibility of classical *imitatio* in nineteenth-century America with one key difference—a democratization of who counted as an exemplary teacher.

Analysis of freedpeople’s adapted practice of *imitatio* opens up a way of reading schoolbooks as “scripts” which could be challenged or put to new uses in the classroom or by individual readers, especially in the service of self-teaching. A vast range of elementary educational texts with differing pedagogical goals had become newly available to African Americans in the post-Emancipation South, from the American Tract Society’s *Freedman’s series* to schoolbooks and papers donated from the North. Teachers and students, with or without assistance from the bureau or other organizations, used whatever materials they could find or buy: “In response to the Freedmen's Bureau question, ‘What books do you use?’ one Georgia teacher replied, ‘Any I can get’” (Williams 126). Missionary teachers often used networks of friends and family to facilitate donations. Thomas Creswell, a teacher for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Knoxville, Tennessee, wrote a poem to students at a Sabbath School back
home, requesting them to “send your papers, dimes and dollars, / To educate our
sable scholars”:

We need your papers,—every one—
Then don’t forget to send them on,
When you have read them do not fail
To send them quickly through the mail.
(“To the children of the U.P. Sabbath School”)

As suggested by such instances of personally solicited donations, elementary readers
and spellers used in freedpeople’s schools were often the same as those used in the
North at mid-century: “The bureau and the various aid societies were forced by
financial considerations to depend primarily on donations of old second-hand works”
for the schools they helped set up (Morris 187). Heather Andrea Williams reports a
range of schoolroom titles named by teachers, including “Webster’s Spelling Book,
Walker’s Dictionary, McGuffey’s Readers, Wilson’s First and Second Reader,
Sanders’ Reader and Spellers, New York Reader, Smith’s Grammar, Pinneo’s
Grammar, and Freedmen’s Primers,” a list that shows the breadth of material being
put to use (128). Circulating alongside secondhand schoolbooks were texts produced
by African Americans, mainly the African Civilization Society’s short-lived
newspaper The Freedman’s Torchlight, and texts published by the evangelical
American Tract Society, particularly the educational newspaper The Freedman and
the Freedman’s schoolbook series, which included a speller, primer, and second and
third reader.6

6 Ronald E. Butchart singles out Webster’s Elementary Spelling Book and
McGuffey’s and Wilson’s readers as books frequently used in freedpeople’s schools.
Besides American Tract Society materials, educational texts commissioned for
This array of schoolbooks and educational texts reflects the strikingly divergent pedagogical and social aims of teachers and missionary organizations with conflicting visions of the role African Americans would play in the future of the war-torn nation. Overwhelmingly, ATS educational materials directed freedpeople toward a passive model of citizenship with the end goal of reading as opposed to speaking, a pedagogical model that was becoming increasingly influential as the century progressed, but which limited black students’ potential for meaningful political involvement in the public sphere.\(^7\) Analysis of the ATS’s de-prioritization of elocution and public speaking for newly emancipated African Americans brings to light an under-examined pedagogical juncture—freedpeople’s education in the 1860s—during which there was more institutionalized support for African American literacy than for the development of oral eloquence. This somewhat surprising freedpeople such as the ACS’s *The Freedman’s Torchlight* (1866) and Lydia Maria Child’s *The Freedmen’s Book* (1865) had very limited circulation: “The American Civilization Society was apparently unable to raise the funds to publish more than a few issues of the *Freedman's Torchlight*. Child’s book was used in the black schools in New Berne, North Carolina, at least, but there is no evidence that it gained wide use in southern black schools” (Butchart 126).

\(^7\) For the ATS, the mid-nineteenth-century pedagogical shift away from alphabetic, phonics-based learning (in which students memorized tables of nonsense syllables before graduating to reading words) and toward word-based learning (in which students immediately began reading meaningful content) supported Protestantism’s goal of fostering faith via daily reading of the Bible. For new mainstream schoolbooks such as the *McGuffey’s* series, the shift prioritized the training of young children who might be put off by complicated pronunciation guides and it reflected rapidly increasing literacy rates among women and people in rural areas, for whom elocution was considered less of a priority. See Richard L. Venesky, “A History of the American Reading Textbook” (1987); David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (2004); and Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (2004).
historical detour offers a different, and equally relevant, lens for analyzing nineteenth-century assessments of African American civic engagement than that offered by scholarship on nineteenth-century black authorship. At a time when the classically-trained white orator was the quintessential citizen, black orators—the exceptional Frederick Douglass notwithstanding—were even less institutionally supported than were black readers or black authors.

The educational methods ATS schoolbooks recommended, however, were not always indicative of methods employed by teachers and students who used them. Documented episodes of learning and teaching in the records of the ATS and the Freedmen’s Bureau as well as in the letters and diaries of missionary teachers help fill some of the gaps in the necessarily fragmented archive of oral and participatory learning practices, and they suggest that freedpeople used whatever educational methods best facilitated effective communal learning—often oral recitation. The availability of texts from the early republic prioritizing elementary elocutionary lessons, like Webster’s *Elementary Spelling Book*, offered tools for African American learners to take charge of their own education and to augment the political efficacy of black voices in the public sphere.

In 1865, John W. Alvord, the General Superintendent of Schools for the Freedmen’s Bureau, observed that freedpeople were “determined to be self-taught.” Borrowing Alvord’s phrase as a marker for African Americans’ communal educational efforts, in *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* Heather Andrea Williams demonstrates that local black communities were
the driving force behind education and the formation of new schools in the post-
Emancipation South:

in many places schools that history has labeled American Missionary
Association schools, for example, could just as easily have been called
freedpeople’s schools. Certainly missionary employees taught in the schools,
but time after time, the sources revealed that in fact former slaves conceived
of the school, donated their churches to house it or built new cabins from
scratch, provided fuel, and paid tuition. Sometimes a freedperson even taught
the school until a better trained northerner arrived. (5)

Similarly, when schools were not available or work prevented freedpeople from
attending, they took their lessons when and where they could, studying their letters
during free moments and listening to family members or friends reading aloud in the
evenings. All of these initiatives had precedent under slavery, but by necessity had to
be covert since slaves were typically forbidden access to books or educational
instruction by state law. It is the continuing spirit of this “self-taught” attitude
towards education—particularly in the revitalization of Quintilian’s model of imitatio
in participatory practices of self-teaching—that distinguishes the way African
Americans engaged with the legacy of classical rhetoric in the schoolbooks and
pedagogical models circulating in the post-Emancipation South.

I. Elocutionary Education in Print

In the early nineteenth-century U.S., the engaged citizen was recognized as
the white man who participated in government and community organizations using, to
a large extent, his skill in public speaking. Such representative men were trained
from an early age in principles of elocution adapted from classical rhetoric, a legacy
that can be traced by examining the prominence in nineteenth-century schoolbooks of the Roman rhetorician Quintilian’s recommendations for the training of the orator. While Quintilian documented his advice in a twelve-book rhetorical treatise, his comprehensive instructions were intended for teachers, not students. In contrast, as the following history of nineteenth-century elocutionary schoolbooks shows, advancements in printing technologies brought educational texts into the hands of students at rates far surpassing previous centuries. This shift, accompanied by the popularity of literary societies and other forms of democratized learning, set the stage for the transferal of elocutionary rhetorical principles to a greater number of learners, including African Americans in the post-Emancipation South.

Quintilian’s program of education laid out in his 95 CE *Institutio Oratoria* encompasses the entire training of the ideal Roman orator, from learning the alphabet to preparing and delivering speeches. A crucial component of this education consists of moral instruction and training for virtuous citizenship by aspiring to the examples set by preeminent men such as the fourth century BCE Greek orator Demosthenes or the first century BCE Roman Cicero. Quintilian borrows the basis of his definition of the ideal orator from Cato: “Therefore let the orator whom we are establishing be, as prescribed by Cato, ‘a good man skilled in speaking’ [vir bonus dicendi peritus]; and, truly, that which Cato put first and which is by nature more powerful and more important, is that he at least be ‘a good man’” (12.1.1). For Quintilian, training the young child to become a *vir bonus* involves a comprehensive education—not one

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8 All translations of Quintilian used in this chapter are my own.
focused solely on craft. He cites a break between the disciplines of rhetoric and philosophy that he and, before him, Cicero seek to suture in the person of the ideal orator through education:

Moreover we are educating that perfect orator, who cannot exist unless he be a good man [\textit{vir bonus}], and for that reason we demand in him not only exceptional capacity in speaking, but all moral excellences [\textit{virtutes}] of character. Nor have I yielded to the idea that, as some have thought, the doctrine of an upright and virtuous life should be consigned to philosophers, since that man who is a true citizen and suited to the direction of public and private matters, who is able to guide cities by his resolutions, lay the foundation for laws, and improve judgments, is truly none other than our orator. (Prooemium 9-10)

Quintilian’s virtuous citizen-orator has a public responsibility to provide a voice for just causes, defend truth, and guide public opinion. His comprehensive education in ethics as well as other subjects prepares him for this task, and he carries it out through his extensive training in eloquent public speaking. In particular, Quintilian’s insistence on the orator’s \textit{virtus}, or moral excellence, lays the framework for his definition of the orator as the quintessential \textit{vir bonus}: \textit{virtus} is a derivative of \textit{vir}, with a primary meaning of “manliness” that also connotes general excellence, virtue, and courage. In the \textit{vir bonus}, manliness coincides with moral excellence, a gendered conception of the orator that persisted through most of the nineteenth century, as the experiences of female orators studied in later chapters will show.

Erik Gunderson argues that Quintilian’s orator’s public function doubles as a self-perpetuating performance of authority, one in which being a good man reinforces one’s class and gender status at the same time as it is enabled by it:

Good, then, is not so much a bland qualifier as it is a pointer to evaluation within a social context. In other words, a “good man” is a man seen \textit{tout court}
in his full, dominant social capacity and one who has proven himself valuable within this society. He is an asset to the world, and in all likelihood has derived assets (*bona*) from the world. His is the man on top of society, and the man most invested in it. (Gunderson 7)

The ideal orator, therefore, must already be poised in a position of social authority in order for his *virtus* to offer beneficial public effects. To demonstrate what he means by a *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, Quintilian most frequently names two examples: Cicero and Demosthenes. While he admits that neither had attained perfect virtue—a quality that in his opinion no orator had yet reached—he points to Demosthenes’ “admirable public resolutions [*pulcherrima...in re publica consilia*]” and “the goodwill [*voluntatem*] of the ideal citizen [*civis optimi*]” present in Cicero (12.1.15-16). His establishment of Cicero and Demosthenes as exemplary *viri boni* invites students to follow their example, and indeed in nineteenth-century schoolbooks it is these two men who continue to be named as exemplars of oratorical skill and public prominence.

Throughout the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian urges the cultivation of a pedagogical practice of imitation in which students mimic the best examples. In recommending readings for the young orator-in-training, he writes, “Therefore safest is the brief advice by Livy in a letter written to his son, that he ought to read Demosthenes and Cicero, then everyone else only to the extent that they most resemble Demosthenes and Cicero” (10.1.39). Students were then encouraged to imitate the best elements of their oratorical techniques, a practice known as *imitatio*. Quintilian’s advice extended to the selection of teachers as well—only the best should
be chosen, because his example would be the students’ primary real-life guide to oratory and *imitandi ratione*, the principle of copying:

It is the work of the teacher to demonstrate every day in now this case and now that case what should be the order of topics and what their connection, so that little by little this practical experience might be transferred to similar cases [*usu...ad similia transitus*]: for it is not possible to be taught [*tradi*] everything that art can produce. What painter learned to sketch all the forms that appear in nature? But once he has understood the principle of copying [*imitandi ratione*], he will emulate [*adsimulabit*] whatever impression he has received. (7.10.8-9)

By cultivating the technique of *imitatio*, Roman students gained the discretionary ability to transfer the best elements of exemplary models to new contexts—a classical model of adaptation that, to flash forward momentarily, offers a rich historical analogue to oral practices of learning by example employed by African Americans, women, and others who were not usually privy to advanced elocutionary training in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Whereas for Quintilian exemplary models included preeminent orators and trained teachers, in the nineteenth century, printed schoolbooks with prescriptive details about pronunciation and inflection often filled this role, even in classroom settings. The flexibility of classical *imitatio* was circumscribed by print even as mass production and wide circulation made the tenets of classical rhetorical education more available. Ironically, then, it was especially socially disadvantaged students, like African American learners in the post-Emancipation South, who, by promoting self-teaching using limited resources, reclaimed the roots of classical *imitatio* in oral practices of learning by example—and in doing so radically transformed educational accessibility in the nineteenth-century U.S.
A closer look at the translation of Quintilian’s educational precepts into nineteenth-century elocutionary handbooks—and the “ideal” American orator they helped train—helps set the stage for the interventions of African American learners into this legacy. Quintilian’s educational precepts for the Roman orator played an important role throughout the course of Western education, not only as a founding example of a text detailing a pedagogical method, but also as a style of pedagogy that persisted even as its intended context—that of educating the virtuous Roman orator-citizen—no longer applied. Early Renaissance humanists followed Quintilian’s educational model closely; gradually, however, the focus shifted away from oratorical training alone and teachers instead applied his principle of *imitatio* to a whole range of literary applications, particularly composition and language instruction.\(^9\) This shift corresponded to a declining interest in *pronuntiatio*, or delivery, the fifth canon of classical rhetoric.\(^10\) In the seventeenth century in America, for example, Puritan oratorical models downplayed delivery, drawing auditors’ attention away from the body and its gestures and toward the word itself. However, the “elocutionary revolution” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries re-emphasized the delivery or

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\(^9\) See, for example, Roger Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster* (1570), in which he outlines a method of teaching Latin that prioritizes imitation of style: students would translate a passage by Cicero into English and then, without looking at the original, render the passage back into Latin. The schoolmaster would praise the best approximations of Cicero’s style: “When the child bringeth it turned into Latin, the master must compare it with Tully’s book and lay them both together, and where the child doth well, either in choosing or true placing of Tully’s words, let the master praise him and say, ‘Here ye do well’” (642).

\(^10\) The first four canons are *inventio* (invention), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), and *memoria* (memory). The fifth canon was sometimes called *actio*, which referred particularly to gesture whereas *pronuntiatio* refers especially to vocal delivery.
performance of speech—“the tones, gestures, and expressive countenance with which a speaker delivered those words”—as a vital element of self-presentation and rhetorical persuasion (Fliegelman 2). A movement with roots in eighteenth-century Scotland and Ireland, elocution soon crossed the Atlantic and blended with post-Revolutionary nationalist sentiment to produce a new kind of popular oratory in the U.S., one which prioritized the trained voice and body as indicators of proper civic engagement.

The gradual metamorphosis of Quintilian’s model of *imitatio* into a prescriptive set of guidelines for class status and polite speech in early nineteenth-century America is tied to innovations in print technology, including stereotype plates and steam-powered printing, that facilitated the rapid increase of new and reprinted schoolbooks. Whereas Renaissance humanists had adapted *imitatio* to a whole range of classroom applications dependent on a close relationship between student and teacher, nineteenth-century Anglo-American pedagogy was increasingly reliant on the authority of the textbook. Historians of elocution have noted a curious relationship between the popularization of public speaking in the early nineteenth century and the expansion of the printing industry: “a revived interest in delivery manifests in and around the same moment as the heyday of print culture…. A flood of penny press newspapers, serial sheets, periodicals, political pamphlets, and pulp fiction emerged concurrent with the increased popularity of parlor recitals, speech
competitions, and similar oratorical practices” (McCorkle 33). Schoolbooks played a particularly important role in this convergence. Instructional texts “became so ubiquitous during the early republic that they constituted a significant part of a typical printer's bread-and-butter income” (Eastman 8). Candy Gunther Brown estimates that, by 1860, schoolbooks made up as much as “30 to 40 percent of total book production” (50). The rapid growth of the market for spellers, primers, and readers in the early nineteenth century accompanied a “spread of oratory beyond the confines of the ministry and the political elite to a much larger and more diverse spectrum of the population. The lyceum movement, public lectures, stump politicking, revival preaching, and antebellum reform movements all caused public speaking to spread far afield” (Winterer, Culture of Classicism 71). Schoolbooks aided in the popularization of public speaking by laying the foundation for proper pronunciation and delivery.

Schoolbooks marketed as elocutionary handbooks such as The United States Speaker, The American Elocutionist, and The Columbian Orator found a wide audience, but the translation of elocutionary education into print brought its own changes: “Elocution fostered an intensely symbiotic relationship between text and speech: children learned to speak by reading printed instructions,” not primarily by learning by example (Eastman 27, emphasis in original). Ben McCorkle argues that printed elocutionary texts regimented classical pronunciation into standardized form:

11 McCorkle argues the relationship was symbiotic: while “the printing industry aided in fostering the popular and academic interest in oratory that lasted through much of the nineteenth century…. elocution's popularity in the first place provided a burgeoning print market with an already established demographic upon which to capitalize (33-34).
Yet another mechanism of remediation, the elocutionary movement advocated the mechanical standardization of delivery in a manner quite different from the audience-centered, contextual canon of classical times. An emphasis on mechanical regularity with respect to delivery borrows a central tenet of the logic of print culture and applies it to the speaking body, implying that there is a universally proper or natural way to deliver a speech of a particular species. (35)

McCorkle’s insight captures an essential shift away from Quintilian’s guiding principle that only the best orators and the best teachers are fit for imitation, and those according to the context in which they are speaking. Of the difference between written instructions and a good teacher, Quintilian says, “The textbook does well enough if it makes the resources of eloquence publicly available; it is our business to know how to use them” (7.10.15). In American elocutionary education, to an almost unprecedented degree, students adhered to the minute and “mechanized” instructions of the textbook rather than following the oral example of the rhetorically talented teacher. The nineteenth-century “culture of reprinting” documented by Meredith McGill perpetuated the repeated circulation of particular speeches, anecdotes, and gestural guides in myriad editions. The speeches of America’s preeminent men—for example Edward Everett or Daniel Webster who were popularly considered the “Cicero of America” (Katula 69) and the “Demosthenes of America” (Remini 219)—might be reprinted alongside those of their ancient counterparts, but these representative men did not take students under their wing as Roman orators had: their printed words served as substitutes.

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12 See Meredith L. McGill, American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853 (2003).
Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair’s 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles* was arguably the most important rhetorical source-text in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Blair’s influence in the U.S. can be traced to the high number of abridgements circulating in the century following the publication of *Lectures*: “in the U.S. alone, *Lectures* was reprinted in sixty-five editions from 1784 to 1873 and was a cornerstone of British and American booksellers' catalogues published after 1800” (McCorkle 39, citing Downey 19). While Blair’s advice is directed primarily towards writing and composition, his *Lectures* had an enormous impact on principles of elocution and polite speech. Blair intended to create a manual of style for Scottish provincials seeking upward mobility in London and elsewhere, a project that included training in “refinement” and “manners” as well as literary taste (Walzer 277). He drew on recent elocutionary theorists such as Irish rhetorician Thomas Sheridan—well-known for his 1762 *A Course of Lectures of Elocution*—as well as classical authorities, in particular Quintilian, whom he called “the Great Roman Critic”: indeed, “nearly one-third of the *Lectures* are devoted” to Quintilian’s pedagogy of rhetorical style (Watson 55, citing Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran).

Blair’s generous usage of Quintilian offers a way of tracing the transformation of classical rhetoric in an American context. In Blair’s unabridged *Lectures*, he bends the definition of classical eloquence to advance a new emphasis on eighteenth-century standards of taste and sophistication:

> Blair's first means of appropriating classical rhetoric for his modern, polite context involved embracing the classical concept of eloquence but redefining it so that Cicero's style is not inherently eloquent but contextually so. Too close an imitation of the actual qualities of Ciceronian style would be as
“ridiculous” as appearing in a modern courtroom in the “Toga of a Roman lawyer.” According to Blair, the defining measure of eloquence was never one particular style. Demosthenes and Cicero were models because the style they chose was appropriate to their setting. In the modern, polite context, plain speech is eloquent speech. This means obscuring what Blair knew: that for Cicero, while appropriateness was an important characteristic of stylistic eloquence, a style that was only clear and correct could not be eloquent, no matter how appropriate it was to its end. (Walzer 285)

Blair relies on the prestige of classical rhetoric and its assurances of the effects of eloquence—i.e. social status—while transforming the classical emphasis on style to mere contextual “appropriateness” and clarity, a move that sets a precedent for American readers to do the same. Classical rhetoric as translated by Blair, then, was already an adaptation—“Cicero” in modern vestments.

Shevaun E. Watson identifies Eliphalet Pearson’s 1802 abridgement of Blair’s Lectures as the single most important American edition, one which many editors relied on for the transmission of Blair’s principles into schoolbooks and treatises (53-58). Pearson’s abridgement, Watson argues, “narrow[s] the scope of ‘classical’ even further than did Blair, casting classical rhetoric not as a complex amalgamation of diverse texts and ideas, but as a tradition that seems to legitimize government rule by elites” (57). Elocution brought a new kind of class-consciousness to American rhetoric, adapting rhetorical training for its prestige rather than its civic applications: “Voices were ‘cultivated’ and traded up. The thriving business of elocutionary lectures, training manuals, exercises, lessons, handbooks, workshops, demonstrations pivoted on this trading up of voices and acquisition of ‘vocal superiority,’ vocal capital” (Conquergood 327, citing Rush 578). In this context, schoolbooks, which defined elocutionary principles appropriate to a nineteenth-century setting, became
the training-ground for a “mannered virtue” that reinforced a prescribed set of social
codes and hierarchies (Ganter 464). The participatory Roman principle of
copying—imitandi ratione—was stilted into a set of codes signaling social status.

William Russell’s 1844 American Elocutionist, for example, sets out to
provide detailed instruction in the enunciation, inflection, modulation, and gesture by
which the successful speaker displays both manners and refinement. Russell, who
was born in Scotland but moved to the U.S. in 1819 to become a lifelong teacher,
informs students that “A distinct articulation…imparts to speech a positive propriety
and gracefulness, for the want of which nothing can compensate” (55). To cultivate
such manners, the Elocutionist includes over 200 pages of instruction before
introducing independent selections for practice in declamation. Russell describes the
“uncultivated” voice as one easily tripped up by the sounds of the English language:
“our frequent consonants, and difficult combinations of sound…tend to betray the
organs into a defective and inarticulate mode of utterance,—a result which may be
observed in the habits of the illiterate and the uncultivated, wherever the English
language is spoken” (55).

In one example, Russell flags errors frequently made by the “uncultivated”
voice using phonetic spelling. He invites students to practice reading from a correct

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13 The link between elocutionary training and virtue in the nineteenth-century U.S.
takes on a slightly different aspect than in classical oratory. Granville Ganter
explains that whereas “The classical republican view held virtue to be a disinterested
civic duty practiced by a ‘Roman patriot, self defined in his civic sphere of action,’”
by the end of the eighteenth century a new kind of “mannered virtue,” featuring “a
variety of strictures concerning work, social relations, and sexuality,” had appeared in
American schoolbooks (464-65).
version of the passage and to make note of spoken errors appearing in the incorrect version:

**Incorrect articulation.** The young of all animuls (anim’ls or animal’s) appear to receive playzhu [pleasure], simply from the exe’cise of their limbs an’ bod’ly fac’lties, without ref’rence to any end tū be attained, or any use tū be answered by the exū’sh’n [exertion]. A child, without knowin’ anything ū th’ use of language, is in a high d’gree d’lighted with bein’ able tū speak. Its incess’nt rep’tishn of a few artic’late sounds, or p’r’aps of a single word, which it has lunn’d tū prûnounce, proves this point clea’ly. (41)

Published in Boston, the *Elocutionist* was marketed to a New England audience, and the aim of the example above was to correct vocal slippages particular to that region, especially among the uneducated, in this case the tendency to drop the “r” sound after a vowel: “exū’sh’n,” “lunn’d,” “clea’ly.” A regimented elocutionary education and its resulting refinements would bring the industrious student several steps beyond his peers, simultaneously stripping the voice of class markers.

Like Blair, authors of American elocutionary handbooks drew on classical orators as sources of inspiration, though not necessarily as models for exact emulation. John E. Lovell’s five-hundred-page *United States Speaker*, first published in 1833, offers numerous short selections for declamation chosen especially for young learners, pairing “Specimens of American Eloquence” and “Specimens of Ancient Eloquence,” a section that leans heavily on the Bible, Demosthenes, and Cicero. In the epigraph, too, Lovell cites Cicero, “Delivery, I say, bears absolute sway in Oratory”; and Quintilian, “Let them enjoy their persuasion, who think, that to be born is sufficient to make a man an Orator: they will pardon our labor, who think, that
nothing can arrive at perfection, unless when nature is assisted by careful cultivation.”

Similarly, “approximately one-third of schoolbooks published before 1810 contained either a version of Demosthenes’ life or one of his speeches,” in part because apocryphal anecdotes about his self-motivated training to overcome defects in delivery were meant to inspire perseverance in elocutionary training (Eastman 227, note 1). Caleb Bingham’s 1797 *Columbian Orator* was one such volume, and many later compilations followed his example. In his “General Instructions for Speaking,” Bingham describes the pains Demosthenes supposedly went through to attain near-perfection in vocal delivery:

> For he had both a weak voice, and likewise an impediment in his speech, so that he could not pronounce distinctly some particular letters. The former of which defects he conquered, partly by speaking as loud as he could upon the shore, when the sea roared and was boisterous; and partly by pronouncing long periods as he walked up hill; both of which methods contributed to strengthen his voice. And he found means to render his pronunciation more clear and articulate, by the help of little stones put under his tongue. (8)

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14 Lovell cites the authors but not the works. The first quote is from Cicero’s *de Oratore* 3.213; the second is from Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* 11.3.11.

15 Demosthenes is a good model for the elocutionists because of his prioritization of *pronuntiatio*: “And indeed Demosthenes, when asked what came first in the whole business of declaiming, gave the honor to delivery, and he also gave it second and third place, until the question ceased to be asked of him” (Quintilian 11.3.6).

16 As Granville Ganter notes, “with 200,000 copies sold by 1832, Bingham’s *Columbian Orator* was a standard, and widely imitated, text in American secondary school education from the late 1790s to 1820” (463). The text’s secondhand circulation continued in the decades following its initial publication, a point proven by Frederick Douglass’ acquisition of it circa 1830, as documented in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (369).
The advice and perseverance of ancient Greek and Roman orators suggested to readers of such schoolbooks that they, too, could reach the elocutionary ideal of their day, overcoming any perceived defects through rigorous training.

In contrast to the elite white male citizen that elocutionary training was imagined to produce, however, was the student whose race or sex inhibited access to formal training or public recognition of oratorical skill. For such students, access to schoolbooks and, in some cases, to literary societies or informal gatherings of like-minded learners sometimes provided a means of pursuing a self-directed rhetorical education. For example, Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish argue that early nineteenth-century African American literary societies in Philadelphia provided a space for communal self-teaching. In an anonymous speech published by a Philadelphia Female Literary Association member in the Ladies’ Department of the Liberator in 1832, classical imitatio is revitalized as a practice of learning by example rather than as a set of prescriptive rules as in so many elocutionary handbooks:

The FLA member…adapts the practice of imitation, entreating her sisters, “If any one imagines that her talents are less brilliant that others, let her not disdain to contrast their superior attainments with her own; suffer not a feeling (shall I say of envy?) to enter [your hearts], but rather strive to imitate their virtues…” (A1). With this admonishment, she argues that studying models of eloquence should include the work of other African-American women. Transforming the approach of the Scots theorists, who privilege canonical

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17 Women and African Americans were regularly excluded from institutionalized training in rhetoric and elocution (including classical languages) up until the mid-nineteenth century for women and the very late 1860s for African Americans (when institutions of higher learning like Fisk and Howard began to make such courses available to African Americans in the South). See Caroline Winterer, The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910 (2002): 23; Bacon and McClish 33; and Susan C. Jarratt, “Classics and Counterpublics in Nineteenth-Century Historically Black Colleges” (2009): 134-47.
models, she democratizes the principle of imitation while bestowing agency upon African-American women within an organization that they direct and control. (Bacon and McClish 33-34)

In this way African American women in antebellum Philadelphia literary societies bypassed their lack of access to institutions of higher learning by cultivating practices of communal self-teaching, challenging the idea perpetuated by Quintilian, Blair, and white American elocutionists that only social elites or proven orators should be emulated.

II. Self-Teaching Using Webster’s Speller

Freedpeople learning to read in the South during the years 1863 to 1872, which will be the period of focus for the remainder of the chapter, made use of a wide variety of elementary schoolbooks and educational materials for self-teaching. As discussed above, most of the materials produced by the American Tract Society for freedpeople encouraged the end goal of silent reading in place of oral recitation and declamation. However, elementary training in these areas was available through some secondhand schoolbooks donated from Northern philanthropists, and sometimes in classroom lessons designed by Northern teachers. Preeminent among these older donated books was Noah Webster’s 1841 *Elementary Spelling Book*, which for most of the century (in several editions) had formed the core of elementary education, combining training in learning to read and write with training in *pronuntiatio*, or oratorical delivery. The circulation of second-hand copies of Webster’s speller and other such books among newly emancipated African American communities in the
South created a particular niche in which the principles of early nineteenth-century pedagogy continued to influence the elementary stages of literacy acquisition. For African American learners, exposure to texts and lessons encouraging oral recitation facilitated practices of self-teaching via oral transmission and, furthermore, lay the groundwork for continued interest in public speaking.

In the same way that Lovell’s *Speaker* and Bingham’s *Orator* were designed to encourage young students to give increased attention to delivery, Noah Webster’s spelling book was intended to train students who were just learning to read in the finer points of proper pronunciation. The first version of Webster’s book was published in 1788, and it was subsequently revised as *The American Spelling Book* in 1829 and then as *The Elementary Spelling Book; Being an Improvement on ‘the American Spelling Book’* in 1841. The speller was part of a series including a primer and reader, but overwhelmingly it was the speller that reached the highest circulation. As early as 1818 the speller “had sold 5 million copies” (Williams 130), and by mid-century the 1841 edition was selling at a rate of a million copies per year (Kendall 93). The edition considered here is the 1841 edition—popularly named “the blue-backed speller” because of the blue paper pasted over its durable wooden covers—because of its prominence in the print market at mid-century, its second-hand recirculation in the South after Emancipation, and its familiarity to teachers hired by aid societies such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association.
Webster’s development and revision of the spelling book over the years corresponded to his work on developing the first comprehensive American dictionary, his 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (an early version of which was published in 1806). The two projects—the dictionary and the speller—constituted a program of bringing American English into its own. Rather than having to rely on reprinted English spelling books and dictionaries, students could have their own American speller. Webster writes in the preface, “In short, this little book is so constructed as to condense into the smallest compass a complete SYSTEM of ELEMENTS for teaching the language; and however small such a book may appear, it may be considered as the most important class-book, not of a religious character, which the youth of our country are destined to use” (7).

While many scholars have attended to Webster’s role in creating a nation of readers, we tend to overlook that Webster’s educational program was frequently named as an important element in the young orator’s training. Lovell makes a point to acknowledge his reliance on Webster for orthography, implying that students will find a continuity between *The Elementary Spelling Book* and *The United States Speaker*: “The orthography will be found, generally, to agree with the improvements of that illustrious American Lexicographer, Doctor Webster.” (iv). And Webster writes, “The pronunciation here given, is that which is sanctioned by the most general usage of well-bred people both in the United States and in England” (5). The importance of *The Elementary Spelling Book* to nineteenth-century elocutionary training, then, cannot be overlooked: teachers could have paired Webster’s book with
Lovell’s (or any number of others) for a comprehensive elementary elocutionary program.

Webster’s method of teaching words as combinations of syllables corresponds quite directly to Quintilian’s recommendations. Quintilian’s stated goal of designing a program for educating the ideal orator from infancy to declamation compelled him to spend a significant portion of Book One discussing the best way of learning to read in preparation for a career in public speaking. The method recorded by Quintilian is an important precursor to the printed syllabariums in early U.S. schoolbooks from the *New England Primer* to Webster’s spelling book. According to Quintilian,

> With syllables, there is no short cut…. It is more useful to repeat syllables and to impress them upon the mind for a long time, and, in reading, also not to hasten toward rapidity or making connections, until at least the joining of letters among themselves is able to be supplied without hesitation or doubt and without any delay of thinking…. At first, then, let reading be sure, then joined together, and for a long time slower, until with practice the student achieves faultless rapidity. (1.1.30-33)

The method described in this passage is designed to teach students to read sets of syllables which must be memorized and practiced until they are known by heart: only then can the student move on to reading whole words, which will be understood as familiar syllables joined together.

The model of learning in Webster’s speller draws on Quintilian’s pedagogy of oral recitation, handed down through the centuries and equally useful in English as in Latin. In Webster’s speller, learning to read syllable by syllable is translated onto the page as a series of tables presenting the relevant sounds, first tables of two-letter consonant-vowel syllables “ba be bi bo bu by” and on through all the consonants, and
then to vowel-consonant tables “ab eb ib ob ub,” etc., all to be recited aloud repeatedly and learned by heart (16-17) [Figure 1.1]. These are followed by tables with three-letter syllables and, finally, words. Webster’s method, “based on centuries of oral tradition, teach[es] articulation independent of meaningful language” until the speaker is ready to transfer the skills learned in these early recitations into the decoding of multi-syllabic words (Crain 96). Webster presents these harder words in later lessons that combine practice in pronunciation with various informative facts and morals. For example, Lesson No. 85 “Words of Three Syllables, Accented on the First,” guides students through the pronunciation of words such as “origin,” “lexicon,” and “Cicero”:

All mankind have their origin from Adam.
A lexicon is a dictionary explaining words….
Abraham was the great ancestor of the Hebrews.
Cicero was the most celebrated of the Roman orators.
If John sells goods to James on credit, John is the creditor, and James is the debtor. (70)

Webster’s method of oral recitation trains students in the proper pronunciation of words through repeated drill and exercise. In the original 1783 edition of the Spelling Book, he advises teachers to have students “spend one part of the day in reading the easy lessons; and the other part in getting the tables by heart” (qtd. in Venesky 252). This practice of memorizing and reciting the syllable tables was ubiquitous in early nineteenth-century American pedagogy, and its principles were consistent with Quintilian’s recommendation for young orators-in-training. In Webster’s text, learning to read is synonymous with learning to speak, a combination with which the elocutionists wholeheartedly agree. Principles of pronunciation take precedence over
speed in literacy acquisition, a value that serves students well in subsequent elocutionary lessons.

However, by mid-century, even as Webster’s 1841 edition of the speller continued to circulate, new elementary schoolbooks began to emphasize basic vocabulary-building exercises rather than the principles of pronunciation previously demonstrated by tables of advanced words organized according to syllable and accent. Thorough training in pronunciation moved from the spelling book into advanced readers: “Toward the middle portion of the nineteenth century, the nonsense syllables disappeared—particularly as a true primer (in the modern sense) developed—and the complicated pronunciation and syllable division rules were relegated to the higher level classes” (Venesky 255). Many elementary schoolbooks
donated to freedpeople’s schools in the 1860s reflected this shift. For example, while the popular McGuffey’s *Eclectic First Reader* (1836) prioritizes word-based content right away—“Ann has a new book. / It is the first book. / Ann must keep it nice and clean” (McGuffey 1)—and does away with word tables, McGuffey’s *Eclectic Fifth Reader, or Rhetorical Guide* (1844) includes a forty-seven-page section describing the “principles of elocution, including articulation, inflections, accent in emphasis, instructions for reading verse, cultivation and management of the voice, and gesture” (Venesky 258). The transferal of detailed training in pronunciation to higher-level readers reflected an increasing insistence on designing elementary reading material for young children, a shift that assisted the transition to a much higher national literacy rate but which also, by consequence, stripped elementary literacy training of elocutionary principles. Many learners using these popular texts, especially those in rural areas or poorer families, including freedpeople, would not progress all the way to McGuffey’s *Fifth Reader* or its equivalent and so would not receive training in any form of classical pronuntiatio. This consequence reinforces Conquergood’s

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18 McGuffey’s 1838 *Eclectic Progressive Spelling Book* does present a condensed version of the two-letter syllable tables prominent in Webster’s, but as the preface suggests, the distinctions between vowel sounds are not uniformly enforced: “The difference between the sound of o in nor and not; of a in fall and wad, as well as between u in rule and tube, seems too nice to be appreciated by an unpractised ear. These distinctions being unnecessary, and tending only to embarrass the learner, have not been retained.”

19 Venesky cites the influence of reformers like Henry Barnard and Horace Mann in the “attack against arcane and unchildlike reading content in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In an article in the American Journal of Education, Barnard exclaimed, ‘Our spelling books in general what are they? Fit for philosophers it may be-fit for those who already possess a liberal education; but evidently unfit for children’” (261, citing Barnard 482).
characterization of elocutionary training as an indicator of class status and a pathway to upward mobility. Like most such signifiers, lack of access to the training needed to acquire it perpetuated the division between those who could deploy it and those who could not.

On the other hand, the continued high circulation of Webster’s *Elementary Spelling Book*, which played a significant role in early preparation for elocutionary training, made elementary elocutionary resources available to many who did not have access to further training. In Freedmen’s Bureau and American Missionary Association records, freedpeople’s teachers repeatedly named Webster’s speller as an important resource and a frequently donated book (Williams 130). The availability of the then slightly antiquated “blue-backed speller” in the post-Emancipation South and, even more importantly, its rootedness in oral recitation, supported adapted learning practices including self-teaching and peer teaching that did not necessarily require a rigid schoolroom structure. In the 1860s, freedpeople with access to the speller or lessons inspired by it—since many Northern teachers working for the Bureau or the American Missionary Association had been raised on Webster’s—took advantage of this flexibility in order to find time for impromptu lessons and study in between work and family obligations.

In the *Fifty-Second Annual Report of the American Tract Society*, amidst testimonies portraying freedpeople’s eagerness for literacy and letters requesting

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20 The famous antebellum example is of Frederick Douglass learning to write and spell using his masters’ son’s discarded copy of Webster’s spelling book circa 1830—an achievement that facilitated his later escape (372).
book donations, an excerpt from the *Charlottesville Chronicle* provides a glimpse of the role of Webster’s book in freedpeople’s elementary education. The author’s hyperbolic representation of the students’ first lessons barraging the ears of everyone in Charlottesville offers important insight into the continuing relevance of oral recitation for African American learners and the effect of such lessons on the changing soundscape of Southern communities:

Charlottesville is fairly entitled to be called the literary center of the South. There is, first, the University of Virginia, with its learned professors on all sorts of subjects; then we have two large female seminaries, where young ladies learn thirty or forty things ending in -ology; then we have some half-dozen first-class academies for boys; then several select schools; then a number of schools for the English branches. And then the whole colored population, of all sexes and ages, is repeating from morning to night, a-b—ab; e-b—eb; i-b—ib; c-a-t—cat; d-o-g—dog, etc., through all the varieties of the lesson in orthography. There are some four or five colored schools, and little negro chaps darken every door with primers in their hands. If we pass a blacksmith-shop, we hear a-b—ab; if we peep into a shoemaker’s shop, it is a-b—ab; if we pass a negro cabin in the suburbs of town, we hear the sound of a-b—ab; if the cook goes out to suckle her infant, it is a-b—ab; the dining-room servant washes up his dishes and plate, crying a-b—ab; Jerry blacks boots, saying, with rapid strokes, a-b—ab; the whole air is resonant with a-b—ab. The little yellow boy who sleeps in our chamber awoke us the other night muttering a-b—ab. If you send a little negro boy on an errand, he is spelling every thing he meets in one syllable. The little white boys look at them wonderingly. In a month or so we expect to issue an evening edition of

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21 This and other descriptions of scenes of learning and teaching printed in the American Tract Society’s annual reports between 1864 and 1868 constitute a useful, but limited archive of excerpted reports and letters furnished by teachers, school superintendents, and ministers working among freedpeople. As Nord writes of these excerpts, their representativeness is compromised due to the principle of their selection, calculated to appeal to donors to the American Tract Society, convincing them of the demand for more books and the good use being made of those already in circulation (135). However, the descriptions of pedagogical practices embedded within the excerpts examined in this chapter can be momentarily separated from ATS rhetoric for the purpose of creating a partial reconstruction of the role elocutionary principles such as pronunciation and oral repetition played in freedpeople’s education.
the ‘Chronicle,’ in monosyllables, to increase our circulation,—perhaps a pictorial with tubs and spades, and ants and cows, and owls and bats, like the primers. (50)

The principles of orthography described here are a direct legacy of Quintilian’s program of teaching the young orator to read, mediated through Webster’s 

*Elementary Spelling Book* and its impact on American pronunciation, literacy training, and elocutionary training. This excerpt from the *Charlottesville Chronicle* is not a literal representation of any particular school lesson, but its exaggerated repetition of “a-b—ab” does suggest that the pedagogical practice of having students memorize syllable tables was a significant component of elementary instruction in freedpeople’s schools, at least in Charlottesville. While the tone of the article reduces the educational efforts of the African American population in Charlottesville to the cry of “a-b—ab,” the choice of this example clearly marks the continuities between usage of Webster’s speller in freedpeople’s schools with education of children in the North decades before—suggesting that the recitation of syllables that prepared New England students for more advanced elocutionary lessons provided a similar service for freedpeople.

Furthermore, the article’s tone suggests that the familiar ring of “a-b—ab” sounded like a throwback to the early Republic for white listeners. As the popularity of the new *McGuffey’s* schoolroom series demonstrates, new elementary schoolbooks at mid-century were training students for reading, not *pronuntiatio*. The freedpeople described in the *Charlottesville Chronicle* reciting Webster’s syllabarions were walking reminders of a time of when neoclassical pedagogy shaped post-
Revolutionary America. Ironically, after Emancipation, these same elocutionary exercises were regarded by the author of the *Chronicle* article as a caricature coming from the mouths of newly freed African Americans seeking to claim their citizenship.

While the *Chronicle* article satirizes the memorization and repetition of monosyllables as an outdated pedagogical method, what it really takes issue with, it seems, is the way that African-American voices—and, in particular, voices-in-training—had suddenly begun to actively take over public and private spaces. A series of engravings “drawn…from life” by a touring artist and printed in *Harper’s Weekly* suggests that, even for Northern audiences, the sudden ubiquity of “colored scholars” in the South was a novelty (“Colored Scholars”) [Figure 1.2]. Oral recitation of lessons extended beyond the classroom and into freedpeople’s daily lives and work, in particular via an adapted practice of *imitatio*. Those who could not attend schools heard the lessons from others, passed along by word of mouth, and practiced them when they could: “if the cook goes out to suckle her infant, it is a-b—ab…Jerry blacks boots, saying, with rapid strokes, a-b—ab.” Webster’s emphasis on memorization and recitation supported an adapted practice of *imitatio* in which orally recited lessons—because of their very audibility—functioned as transferable exercises that made every learner a teacher, too. Whereas for Quintilian, trained teachers guided learners even in the most elementary lessons, for freedpeople oral transmission of such lessons democratized access to instruction in spelling and pronunciation. The practice of oral recitation of Webster’s syllabariums in itself brought African American voices more prominently into the public sphere.
In addition, the *Chronicle* article, by joking about producing a monosyllabic edition of the paper for freedpeople, reinforces the observation documented by many correspondents to the American Tract Society, the American Missionary Association, and the Freedmen’s Bureau of the high demand for elementary reading material among freedpeople of all ages. It is likely that the author has in mind the ATS’s popular newspaper, *The Freedman*, which was not the monosyllabic caricature presented here, but which was frequently seen in the hands of freedpeople learning to read and those looking for news pertaining to African American communities. *The Freedman* is a four-page “combination newspaper and textbook” produced beginning in 1864 by the ATS’s Boston branch that includes mini-lessons in history, arithmetic, and spelling as well as an “intelligence” column for news of particular interest to freedpeople, including reports of the founding of new schools (Morris, *Freedman*).
The Freedman was a particularly successful medium because of its low production costs and ease of distribution. In 1864, ATS reported that it was sending about fifty thousand copies per month to the South, a rate of distribution that continued for several years (Fiftieth Annual Report 93).22

The Chronicle article’s facetious suggestion that a monosyllabic evening edition of the paper would increase its circulation underlines the extent to which the emergence of a newly visible reading community was transforming print circulation in the South. Just as freedpeople’s voices were barraging white folks with “a-b—ab,” their newly visible reading habits seemed to represent an incursion into a trade which had previously been securely in the hands of the elite. This influx of reading material circulating in Southern African American communities included not only schoolbooks and philanthropic texts from Christian missionary organizations like the ATS’s Freedman, but also newspapers and periodicals generated from within African American communities, such as the African Civilization Society’s educational newspaper The Freedman’s Torchlight, which was printed for a short period of time beginning in 1866, and the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Book Concern’s Christian Recorder, founded in 1852 in Philadelphia, which was a very popular national newspaper that found an expanded market in Southern states during the years following Emancipation.23

22 The American Tract Society’s Fifty-fourth Annual Report states that 2,451,000 copies of the Freedman were printed by May 1, 1868 (41). Since printing began in January 1864, this total suggests that an average of approximately 47,000 copies per month were printed between 1864 and 1868.

23 Only one issue of The Freedman’s Torchlight is extant, but it is historically
The newspaper format of educational texts such as *The Freedman* and *The Freedman’s Torchlight* made them conducive to mass distribution—many schools even based their lessons around the monthly issues, supplemented by the teacher’s knowledge and whatever other texts were at hand. Each issue of the ATS’s *Freedman* had the alphabet, a lesson including words of one or two syllables, and two or three more advanced stories or lessons; the only extant issue of the ACS’s *Freedman’s Torchlight* also includes Webster’s syllable tables, “ba be bi bo bu by” (Young 679). The diversity of reading levels represented made the newspapers a valuable resource for communities and individuals who did not have access to schoolbooks. For example, a chaplain reported to the ATS in 1866 that the 25th division of African American troops used *The Freedman* extensively in its fifteen schools that served nearly eight thousand soldiers. With not nearly enough schoolbooks to go around, *The Freedman*’s graduated lessons served as “primer, copy-book, and advanced readers” (*Fifty-Second Annual Report* 60).

The chaplain provides an illuminating account of a typical lesson in which *The Freedman* is used to help teach the alphabet:

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significant as an early example of an educational periodical produced “by and for” African Americans, in this case by members of the African Civilization Society which operated “as a Freedmen’s aid society” during the war (Young 679; see also Morris 190). In a compelling study of African American readers of the *Christian Recorder*, Eric Gardner documents how “subscribers from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia—where A. M. E. ministers were touring, starting churches, and pushing hard for subscribers—represent over a fifth” of the number of identifiable subscribers to the paper between November 1864 and November 1865 (242). Gardner’s research offers valuable proof of lively print circulation in Southern African American communities at this time.
Just go into one of our schools with me. Here are thirty or forty men seated on their rude seats. A few have primers; a few, spelling-books; but most have a ‘Freedman,’ over which they are intently pouring [sic]. The class in the alphabet is called. The letters are read from the paper; the teacher writes them upon the blackboard also; and thus, after two or three lessons, they are fixed in the learner’s mind. (61)

The ability of each student to hold in his hand a book or newspaper with the alphabet in it greatly assists the teacher’s presentation of the letters on the blackboard. The collective oral recitation of each letter in turn, accompanied by its appearance on the blackboard, enables more advanced learners to help those just starting by calling out the letters they have already mastered. The confluence of collective and oral learning practices with increased access to educational texts—especially Webster’s speller and lessons inspired by it—constituted a rich training ground for elementary lessons in pronunciation.

III. Repurposing American Tract Society Schoolbooks

A closer look at the educational materials produced by the American Tract Society for freedpeople and recorded testimony from teachers using them offers provisional evidence that the editors’ goals for ATS schoolbooks—for instruction in reading and in Christian morals—were not always reflective of the uses to which they were put by teachers or students. Missionary teachers such as Esther W. Douglass, a white woman who taught for the American Missionary Association in Virginia,

24 The account continues by narrating successive lessons using the same copy of The Freedman: “A more advanced class takes their place: one of the simple stories is carefully read, the words being spelled out letter by letter. A class more advanced still, follows this; and the harder pieces are read with a fluency and interest which it would delight you to witness” (Fifty-Second Annual Report 61).
Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee from 1864 onwards, describe a diversity of successful teaching outcomes, from students learning to read and write at various levels, to standardization of dialect and pronunciation, to religious conversion and improvements in clothing and domestic skills, to increased power in negotiations with employers. In an unpublished reflection titled *Joy in Service, My Life Story*, Douglass recounts a year of teaching (October 1865 to June 1866) in a rural school in Chatham County near Savannah, Georgia, that she and her co-teacher Frances Littlefield considered a particular success. Douglass’s narrative of progress in this example highlights her use of educational “cards” to establish classroom order—the printed text becomes a civilizing mechanism as well as a means to literacy:

Words can give little idea of the utter destitution of those exslaves. Think of 120 dirty, half naked, perfectly wild, black children crowded on the floor and you will have some idea of my task the first morning of school. Their language was to us, as confused jargon and, with the exception of the few house servants, they could not understand me…. It was much gained when I succeeded in making them understand that the bell meant silence, and they were to repeat after me as I pointed to cards on the wall. Their progress was wonderful. Before I went home (June 66) for the summer vacation they had learned to read and spell all the words on the large cards. There were words of five syllables and Bible verses and hymns that they sang. (Douglass, *Joy in Service*, 14)

Douglass’s teaching tools as described here are a set of printed cards that were most likely donated from the New York branch of the ATS. These cards, “designed so they could be seen by the huge classes meeting in southern barns and churches,” such as

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25 The two women, from Vermont and Maine respectively, called their school the Ogeechee Institute, and it served “children from seven neighboring plantations” (Jones 255).
as the one pictured in an 1866 *Harper’s Weekly* engraving, “measured three feet by four feet, with short words and sentences, borrowed primarily from the *Bible*, printed in huge letters” (Marten 62) [Figure 1.3].

Douglass’s use of them, presumably in lieu of books, is similar to that of the chaplain teaching the alphabet to the 25th division of African American troops: in each case, oral recitation and repetition augment the printed ATS materials, and success in literacy acquisition is measured by communal speaking or singing, not by individual acts of silent reading. Over the course of the 1860s, the ATS sent more and more books and tracts to freedpeople’s schools in the South.

The American Tract Society’s production of schoolbooks and reading material for African Americans was a new development initiated at the start of the Civil War. Since its founding in 1825, the American Tract Society had endeavored to put copies of evangelical tracts in the hands of every American, but until the eve of the Civil War the ATS’s definition of “every American” did not include slaves. As David Paul Nord documents, early-nineteenth-century Christian publishing organizations like the ATS, the American Bible Society, and the American Sunday School Union utilized new print technologies such as stereotyping and steam-powered printing to become pioneers of organized mass media circulation (78). In doing so they also embarked on a nationwide goal of increasing literacy: “Nineteenth-century evangelicals viewed

26 It is an educated guess that these cards were from the American Tract Society, based on the fact that Douglass used ATS material including the “*Freedman’s Primer*” (Douglass, *Joy in Service*, 7) and “a nice bundle of papers from the Tract Society” (Esther W. Douglass diary, 11 April 1868) at other teaching posts, as well as the ATS’s report that “in 1864 300 sets of these cards were in use” in freedpeople’s schools (Marten 62).
education and religion as deeply connected,” in large part because the goal of close study of God’s word encouraged literacy, but also because primers and schoolbooks were excellent vehicles for introducing evangelical models of daily life and worship consistent with Christian values (Brown 50). Many ATS colporteurs traveling in the South and West, especially, “ran into so many nonreaders who had a passion to read that they took to setting up Sunday Schools to teach basic literacy” (Nord 148).

27 The simple, accessible language of the ATS tracts, including the *Tract Primer*, is intrinsically tied to the “plain-style, vernacular language” of Protestantism and the history of Protestants’ rejection of “the ornate Latin rhetoric that they believed the Catholic clergy had used to conceal truth from the masses” (Brown 3). In post-Reformation Protestant worship, the vernacular Bible and its explication replaced the Latin liturgy, a fundamental rhetorical shift that transformed plain written words into vehicles for the sacred.
The Society supplied education books for this purpose, for example the *Tract Primer*, first published in 1818, in which each letter of the alphabet is linked to a biblical character or motif:

Aa / A, is for ADAM, who was the first man;  
He broke God's command, and thus sin began.  
Bb / B, is the BOOK, which to guide us is given;  
Though written by men, the words came from heaven.  
Cc / C, is for CHRIST, who for sinners was slain:  
By him—O how freely!—salvation we gain. (5-6)

The letter B is linked to the Bible, the quintessential “BOOK,” and the rhyme (given/heaven) suggests that learning the letters and reading, in itself, will bring learners closer to God. The antebellum evangelizing efforts of the ATS did not, however, extend to enslaved African Americans because the national organization, not wishing to alienate its southern auxiliaries, upheld a policy of nonintervention into sectional disputes: “Throughout the 1850s, the society prohibited discussions of slavery in its publications” (Thomas 116).²⁸

In 1858, the controversy within the ATS over whether to publish on the topic of slavery caused the American Tract Society of Boston to split off from the national organization, which was based in New York. The outbreak of the Civil War, however, precipitated both branches’ decisions to support African American

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²⁸ Similarly, the ubiquity of ATS colporteurs during the antebellum period made little difference for free African American communities in the South. As Amy M. Thomas’ study of Micah Croswell’s service for the ATS in 1854 in South Carolina demonstrates, the routes assigned to colporteurs prioritized townships, and the demographics of Southern townships were primarily white: “Croswell's assignment to towns virtually ensured that he would not meet any of the 285 free African Americans who lived in Edgefield District in 1850 because, as Burton notes, most free African Americans lived in rural areas” (Thomas 116-117).
communities in the South by introducing pedagogical texts designed specifically for their use. As early as 1862, the Boston society published the Picture Lesson Book, “the first freedmen’s textbook,” and by 1863 they “claimed 21,000 copies were in actual use,” followed a year later by the first issue of The Freedman (Morris 189-90).

Sets of educational “cards” like those used by Esther W. Douglass in Georgia produced by the New York branch were also well into circulation by 1864 (Marten 62). The model of distribution of ATS materials to freedpeople differed significantly from the strategy of colportage the Society had utilized in previous decades. Because other organizations—particularly the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association—had undertaken the project of providing general infrastructural and educational support for the freed population, ATS used their networks as conduits for the distribution of their texts: “Although we have no agents at work among them, other societies have, and our energies are taxed to their utmost in supplying those agencies with the material they need” (Fiftieth Annual Report 93).

The American Tract Society made its main priority publishing and transferred the work of mass distribution to school superintendents, teachers, and chaplains employed by the bureau and the AMA. With the formation of so many new schools, the need for schoolbooks and educational texts was so great that once a shipment arrived the texts were almost instantaneously passed into the hands of students.

With its foot in the door to a whole new segment of the national population, the Boston society decided to undertake the preparation of an entire schoolroom series, supervised by ATS secretary Israel P. Warren: The Freedman’s Spelling Book,
The Freedman’s Primer, The Freedman’s Second Reader, and The Freedman’s Third Reader. The intended “training” in literacy, Christian values, and new responsibilities in the post-Emancipation nation offered to freedpeople by the series as a whole might be summed up by the sentence highlighted at the beginning of this chapter: “The ab-o-li-tion of slave-ry has made an al-ter-a-tion in the con-di-tion of the freed-men, and laid up-on them cor-res-pond-ing du-ties” (The Freedman’s Spelling Book, 85). Warren argued that freedpeople required a special education series to address what he viewed as their particular need for moral and domestic guidance in “civilized” Christian living:

In the department of morals they need special instruction, as in relation to theft, falsehood, and unchastity. These are vices, too frequent, indeed, elsewhere, but particularly rife among those long held in slavery. In all matters pertaining to home and family, they need ‘line upon line, precept upon precept.’ Slaves had no home or family in the true sense of these terms. Legal marriages did not exist; hence conjugal, parental, and filial ties could not be understood as they should be. (Fifty-Second Annual Report 18)

Warren’s emphasis on modeling moral living and family relationships “as they should be” underscores the ATS series’ dual agenda in teaching reading as inextricably paired with Christian values, a combination deemed lacking among freedpeople by missionary-minded evangelists.

Examination of the ATS schoolbooks themselves, however, does reveal some embedded potential for training in elementary elocution and public speaking by enterprising teachers and students, even though the books themselves characterize reading as a primarily religious rather than secular exercise. In terms of its educational strategy as compared to that of Webster’s or elocutionary readers, the
Freedman’s series does provide tools for training in proper pronunciation such as words tables arranged by syllables and emphasis and, by the Third Reader, some brief comments on delivery. However, the model of training in pronunciation differs significantly from the elocutionists. From the beginning, the ATS Spelling Book prioritizes words. Whereas Webster’s trains students in correct enunciation of the vowels—“ba be bi bo by / ca ce ci co cu cy / da de di do du dy” etc.—before progressing to meaningful words, the ATS speller immediately presents words of one and two letters (16). For example, Lesson Four presents the following table of vowel-consonant two-letter words:

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am</td>
<td>at</td>
<td>in</td>
<td>of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an</td>
<td>ax</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as</td>
<td>if</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ox</td>
<td>up</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lesson Five groups these words into demonstrative sentences, assisted by pictures of an ox and a man holding an ax:

AN OX.  AN AX.
It is an ox.  It is an ax.
I am by it.  It is my ax.
He is by us.  Is it an ox?
Am I on it?  No; it is no ox. (9)

The questions serve as reinforcements of the orthographic differences between vowel sounds—for example, “ax” versus “ox”—while linking these differences to meaningful content. Later lessons present pronunciation-based word tables as well as “Words Relating to Particular Subjects” prescribing expected careers and contexts for freedpeople such as “The Farmer,” “The Carpenter,” and “The School-House” (110-52). The retention of some word tables represents continuity with Webster’s method,
while the excision of nonsense syllables and the inclusion of lessons organized by subject (e.g. “The School-House”) reflect departures.

_The Freedman’s Third Reader_ anticipates a curriculum based on students reading the lessons both silently and aloud, but reading aloud is described as a practice designed to encourage internalization of the Christian message of the texts rather than as training in delivery. In an introductory section entitled “General Rules for Reading,” Warren urges students to first read silently for comprehension, then aloud from the book, and finally to memorize certain passages for oral recitation:

1. **GENERAL RULES FOR READING.**
   1. Study the reading-lesson carefully before you try to read it aloud. You cannot read well what you do not understand.
   2. While reading, hold the book in your left hand, avoid stooping forward, keep the shoulders back, and the chest full and round.
   3. Speak every word clearly. Remember that every word has meaning.
   4. Read as if you were speaking your own thoughts.
   5. Speak loud enough to be heard easily in every part of the room, but do not shout.
   6. Commit to memory parts of the lessons, and repeat them with the book shut.
   7. Try to learn something useful from each lesson: this will make you interested in it. (v)

The emphasis on comprehension and memorization reinforces the ATS’s methodology of teaching Christian morals through education. Warren’s advice for speaking encourages internalization of the lessons: “Read as if you were speaking your own thoughts.” Reading aloud becomes an enactment of faith as well as an educational practice. Extremely little is said about delivery, in contrast to elocutionary readers such as _The American Elocutionist_, _The United States Speaker_, and _The Columbian Orator_. Here the only instructions relating to _pronuntiatio_ are to
stand straight with shoulders back, to enunciate, and to speak loudly but not too loudly. Oral recitation from memory plays a relatively minor role: the instructions for speaking are directed toward students reading from the book.

If there had been a fourth or fifth reader in the ATS *Freedman’s* series, perhaps the introductory pronunciation and reading guides would have been supplemented by more substantial elocutionary training. However, with so many elocutionary texts already in circulation in the North, and given the ATS’s interest in training Christian readers rather than speakers, the society no doubt decided that a specialized freedman’s elocutionary text was unnecessary. African Americans’ great need as ATS saw it was for introductory schoolbooks to teach literacy as a pathway to Christian faith, not advanced principles of elocution. Despite these stated goals, mass distribution of the series among freedpeople did result in the transmission of some limited elocutionary principles. For example, students in possession of *The Freedman’s Spelling Book*, which retained some of Webster’s pedagogical strategies, would have had the means to partial training in pronunciation standards salient to the project of American elocutionary training, even if they did not receive direct instruction in *pronuntiatio*.

Esther W. Douglass, who was using the ATS educational “cards” to teach her school in Chatham County, Georgia, in 1865-66 discusses more than once in her personal diaries and reminisces her goal of teaching speaking as well as reading. For her, proper speaking especially seems to mean standardized Northern pronunciation. In the example already discussed above regarding the transformation of the “perfectly
wild, black children” into an orderly class speaking, reciting, and singing in unison, a large component of their “progress” according to Douglass is the correction of their “language [that] was to us, as confused jargon” into the familiar words and pronunciations of the classroom exercises. In another instance, Douglass wrote in her diary about a student in her evening adult class (numbering around 74 students) who exhibited speedy progress in teaching himself to read at home, but whom she thought was still considerably lacking in speaking skills, an observation she represented in part through phonetic spelling: “A man at school last night said, when asked how he learned so fast, ‘I ketch de words letters of de chilun at home and den I comes here an I ketch em good.’ He will soon talk better than that if he comes to school” (Esther W. Douglass diary, 26 January 1866). Douglass’s desire to help him “talk better” reflects, generally, the goals of American elocutionary education, but it also reveals the racialized and regionalized hierarchies inherent in that system. A relatively unusual lesson in comparative pronunciation in The Freedman’s Second Reader does the same, presenting a list of pronunciations and “expressions which should be avoided,” but which were common in the South, including “massa for master,” and “missus for mistress” (10). In these examples, the “cultivated” voice, the elocutionary ideal, was coded as a Northern, not Southern voice. Just as Russell’s American Elocutionist corrected New England accents to a standardized ideal in the 1840s, a handful of ATS lessons and teachers such as Douglass set out to correct similar “discrepancies” in freedpeople’s speech in the 1860s.
In addition to documented instances of teachers or students making use of the limited elocutionary instructions available in the ATS’s *Freedman’s* educational materials, some lessons as printed in the texts offer glimpses of hidden potential for inspiring African American students toward public speaking or political involvement, even when the goal of the lessons was to inspire students to learn to read the Bible. *The Freedman’s Third Reader* consists of 143 lessons covering subjects ranging from biblical stories and parables, American history and world geography, and poems in praise of God or liberty, to biographies of notable people of African descent including Phillis Wheatley, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, and Rev. Dr. Pennington. These latter biographies were no doubt of particular interest to African American students, but the stories as presented in the reader are considerably less complex than in real life. Each biography begins with an account of how the subject learned to read and continues by expounding the great influence literacy had on his or her faith. Reading is immediately linked to reading the Bible. For example:

Phillis early showed great eagerness for learning, and was often found trying to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal. This led a daughter of Mrs. Wheatley to teach her to read; and so rapid was her progress, that in sixteen months she could read the most difficult parts of the Bible. (76)

And, selectively quoting a passage regarding his burgeoning interest in the Bible from Douglass’s 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

The desire for knowledge increased; and especially did I want a thorough acquaintance with the Bible. I have gathered scattered pages from this holy book from the filthy street-gutters of Baltimore, and washed and dried them, that I might get a word or two of wisdom from them. (207-8, emphasis in original)
Each biography frames reading as the pathway to true faith in God, and faith as the pathway to exemplary achievement. This overarching narrative detracts from descriptions of the achievements each person is famous for. For example, Wheatley’s knowledge of Latin and engagement with classical themes in her published poetry are completely overlooked; her “eagerness for learning” is represented as entirely religiously motivated rather than reflective of genuine curiosity and talent. Frederick Douglass receives one line at the end of his story calling him a “true orator,” but otherwise his achievements are dwarfed by assurances of his faith in God. Similarly, L’Ouverture’s story ironically characterizes him as embodying Protestant evangelical morals, conveniently overlooking his Catholicism and radical revolutionary politics: “he gave the whole weight of his example and influence in favor of virtue and religion. He frowned upon the vicious; and only noticed with favor the modest, the quiet, the diligent soldier and citizen” (85). Embedded within each of these subdued portraits, however, is the radical potential that the real-life Wheatley, Douglass, and L’Ouverture represented for African Americans. Talented, well educated, and influential cultural heroes, each could have acted as a role model for motivated students interested in getting involved in writing, oratory, or political or military action.

Two other lessons in the Third Reader are of particular interest because of their documentation of self-directed learning practices with the potential to inspire outcomes quite different than those suggested by the ATS: “How Father Henson Learned to Read” and “Tidy Learning to Read.” The former, based on an 1858 slave
narrative entitled *Father Henson’s Story of His Own Life*, relates the story of Josiah Henson, a forty-seven-year-old black preacher whose literate son teaches him to read [Figure 1.4]. The story tells how Father Henson “never had the privilege of hearing any one read the Bible” until his son, who has just learned to read, begins to read a passage to him one Sabbath morning: “The little fellow came and stood by his father. ‘Where shall I read?’ he asked. ‘Where you please, my son,’ said his father; for he was too ignorant of the Bible to be able to tell him what chapter or verse to take” (20-21). After hearing the verses, Father Henson is so affected that he eventually decides to let his son teach him to read. The framing of Father Henson’s “ignorance” of the Bible—described as an inability to name chapter and verse—indicates the ATS’s devaluing of the spiritual practice Father Henson held before learning to read. According to the ATS biography, he was accustomed to going to “preach or talk to the people” on Sabbath mornings, but after he learns to read the focus turns inward, toward an individual relationship with the Bible: “even now…. I can read his holy Word; and, oh, although I know but a little of it, how I love that little!” (21-22). Here the Bible as accessed through literacy—with its apparatus of chapter and verse—becomes the primary model of daily worship advocated by ATS schoolbooks.

In contrast to the account of Josiah Henson’s life given by *The Freedman’s Third Reader*, however, is the source text written by Henson himself, which presents a quite different version of his reasons for learning to read, and of his relationship to preaching before and after acquiring his literacy. In *Father Henson’s Story of His Own Life*, Henson tells how he pursued training in preaching while he was still
enslaved in Kentucky, and in 1828 after being admitted as a preacher by a Quarterly Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church he began traveling from town to town around Cincinnati, Ohio to raise money to buy his and his family’s freedom (58-64). Through the duplicity of his owner’s family, however, he was cheated of his manumission papers in part because he could not read the agreement that had been written, and so he was forced to make a dangerous escape to Canada. Henson was accustomed to preaching from memorized Bible verses—he says of his son, “I used to get him to read much to me in the Bible, especially on Sunday mornings, when I was going to preach; and I could I could easily commit to memory a few verses, or a chapter, from hearing him read it over” (Henson 132-33). These elaborated circumstances show that Henson’s desire to learn to read was as much or perhaps
more about not wanting be taken advantage of as it was about being able to read the Bible. After learning of “the terrible abyss of ignorance in which I had been plunged all my previous life,” he reports a feeling of renewed commitment to helping those who were still enslaved, which he acted on immediately by becoming involved with the Underground Railroad (137). These details that *The Freedman’s Third Reader* fails to report would have been of interest and value to recently emancipated African American learners who themselves were struggling to negotiate labor contracts and other agreements with Southerners.

Esther W. Douglass reports a similar practical evaluation of the benefits of education among freedpeople in Chatham County, Georgia as that held by Josiah Henson. She and her co-teacher Frances Littlefield were in the middle of their second year of teaching at Ogeechee Institute when they were evicted from the house they were living and teaching in: “the people on Wild Horn plantation had signed a contract that allowed them to reserve a dwelling for the teachers—a stipulation the landowner, William Burroughs (‘Mr. Rebel’), reluctantly agreed to. But as soon as the contract was signed, Burroughs evicted the two teachers” (Jones 279). The struggle was not over the house, but rather over what it was being used for. Douglass wrote in her diary, “The people at Wild Horn say that there was no necessity for our leaving. They say, ‘Dey’s no use for the house, no how. Dem sees how you’s teachin we and gibin we so much sense, dey’s feard we git so wise dey can’t cheat we’” (Esther W. Douglass diary, 29 February 1867). According to Douglass’s report, freedpeople on the Wild Horn plantation believed that the teachers had been forced to
leave because Mr. Burroughs did not like the skills they were teaching them, particularly reading. The broken contract is evidence of the tactics already being used to cheat the former slaves, and Douglass reports shortchanging in rations on other occasions, too. Learning to read offered a way of taking more control over their living situation, not just for freedpeople on the Wild Horn plantation, but throughout the South.

Often, too, communities would be left in situations such as the one described above in which an AMA or Freedmen’s Bureau school might have been in operation for a year, or for a short while, but was closed by force, violence, a teacher’s illness, or lack of funding. Many more rural plantation areas never received outside teachers at all, and so relied on individuals who did know how to read to teach others informally or in makeshift classrooms. Ironically, while the American Tract Society’s educational materials presented lessons meant to facilitate instruction in a traditional classroom setting, with the white missionary teacher guiding students’ progress, some lessons contain embedded strategies for self-teaching and peer-teaching that freedpeople might have utilized.

Lesson CXIV in *The Freedman’s Third Reader*, “Tidy Learning to Read,” features a young black girl, Tidy, who is carrying books for two white girls, Amelia and Susan, who are on their way to school [Figure 1.5]. In the brief story, Tidy asks questions about the pictures of animals in the book and the girls first read some captions to her and then excitedly convince Tidy to begin learning the alphabet. After showing Tidy the shapes of the letters A and B, Amelia describes a method for
Figure 1.5. “Tidy Learning to Read”
Engraving. *The Freedman’s Third Reader*, ATS (1866)

practicing correct identification: “I shall make you do just as Miss Agnes used to
make me. She made me take a newspaper,—see, here's a piece,—and prick the letters
on it with a pin…. Now you take this piece of paper and prick every A and every B
that you can find on it, and to-morrow I'll show you some more” (212). Immediately
after this brief instruction, the school bell rings and the girls leave Tidy to her task.
Not only does this story outline a specific gendered practice for learning the
alphabet—pricking the letters on a newspaper with a pin until their shapes are learned
by heart—but it presents a stark contrast between the institutional learning the white
girls are beneficiaries of and the makeshift education Tidy must seek out for herself.
However, even though the story itself replicates the white teacher-black student motif
common in ATS materials, the potential presented by its content is actually quite radical: “Tidy Learning to Read” presents a model for anyone who knows the alphabet to be able to teach it to someone else, and that was exactly what was happening among freedpeople in the South.

Just as the ancient Roman student learns *imitandī ratione*, the principle of copying, from his teacher, so Tidy learns to emulate Amelia in pricking the letters on the newspaper: a transferable pedagogy of *imitatio* that could be passed along to anyone eager to learn. Because freedpeople were often teaching one another lessons that they themselves had just mastered, including the frequently-remarked-upon phenomenon of young children teaching parents and grandparents, the example furnished by “Tidy Learning to Read” very well may have been put to good use. Rev. John W. Alvord, General Superintendent of Schools for the Freedmen’s Bureau and former secretary of the American Tract Society, recognized the potential of books to provide the tools necessary for African American self-teaching and peer-teaching. Alvord had observed that wherever schoolbooks could be donated in enough supply, freedpeople had undertaken the task of finding or building an adequate schoolroom and enlisting someone who knew how to read as teacher. In his 1866 correspondence with ATS following an extensive tour of the south to assess the condition of schools and educational efforts in African American communities, Alvord encouraged the development of the ATS *Freedman’s* series, arguing that if books were supplied, schools would follow, with or without the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau. He wrote, “Good elementary text-books is now the great want of the freedmen wherever
I have been…. In truth, these spontaneous efforts of the colored people would start up everywhere, if books could be sent them. You must prepare for a large work in this direction” (Fifty-Second Annual Report 56). The adapted practice of *imitatio* in post-Emancipation African American communities transformed even schoolbooks designed to teach reading into scripts for oral transmission.

IV. Black teachers and Black *imitatio*

John W. Alvord’s correspondence with the American Tract Society provides further insight into these “spontaneous efforts” towards self-teaching among freedpeople. In the same letter in which he urged the speedy production of books in ATS’s *Freedman’s* educational series, he conveys a portrait of the makeshift schoolrooms and African American teachers currently meeting the needs of learners:

At all places we have visited, from Washington to Tallahassee, schools have been formed, taught by the freedmen themselves. All our party have been surprised at this unusual fact. These schools are a curiosity. A cellar, a shed, a private room, perhaps an old schoolhouse, is the place; and, in the midst of a group of thirty or forty children, an old negro preacher in spectacles, or two or three young men surrounded by a hundred or more, themselves only in the rudiments of the spelling-book, and yet with a passion to teach what they do know; or a colored woman, who as a family servant had some privileges, and with a woman’s compassion for her race,—these are the institutions and the agencies. (56)

That students in these schools were being taught by other African Americans surprised Alvord, and influenced his advice to the ATS to prioritize the production of schoolbooks over and above any other form of aid. His description of the “old negro preacher in spectacles” and the former house servant “with a woman’s compassion for her race” gives a glimpse of who some of these teachers were—frequently
preachers or those whose work during slavery allowed them access to reading materials. Alvord’s comments on the eagerness of those who had learned only a little very recently to “teach what they do know” suggests, also, that for students in these informal schools it was not a teacher’s perceived authority, but rather his or her ability to pass on tools for learning—from a few letters of the alphabet to strategies for self-teaching—that mattered.

The scenes of learning Alvord illustrates were hardly new in African American communities, except in location and size. Slave narratives document various references to small makeshift schools and Sunday schools held at night and in the woods to avoid risk of detection. Emancipation sparked an increasing visibility of such efforts accompanied by greater access to resources by purchase or donation, including books, fuel, and material to build schools.29

The high demand for schoolbooks encouraged those with access to adapt and modify the lessons for others who did not, in the process becoming teachers in their own right. Writing from North Carolina in 1866, Alvord documents the speedy transmission of elementary lessons from one learner to another:

It is a fact which every one observes, that the freedman no sooner learns even the first letters of the alphabet than he is teaching them to his fellows. A little boy, the other day, in Newbern, who had partially mastered a few letters, was seen in the street pointing a group of boys to the letter T, the initial of a sign-

29 This increased visibility also led to violence and destruction of property: “In perhaps the most egregious attack, white rioters in Memphis, Tennessee, burned down eight schoolhouses in May 1866. In August 1866, during the New Orleans massacre, rioters burned down four black churches in which schools met and attempted to burn several other buildings also used as schoolhouses. Additionally, they demolished a new church in which a school was scheduled to open within a few days” (Williams 124).
board; and his pupils seemed to be learning from him as thoroughly (so far as that one letter was concerned) as if he had been a college professor. (*Fifty-
Second Annual Report* 51-52)

Alvord’s report again points to the public visibility of the rapid progress being made by freedpeople toward literacy. The group of boys put the sign to good use just as if it were a lesson in a spelling book. The example echoes the story “Tidy Learning to Read” in *The Freedman’s Third Reader*. Just as Amelia instructs Tidy to prick every A and B she can find in a newspaper “as Miss Agnes used to make me,” most likely the young boy in Newbern was teaching his friends to recognize the letter T in exactly the same way as he had been recently taught.

Alvord comments on the frequency with which “every one observes” the quick transformation of student into teacher, especially the passing on of the names and shapes of the letters. Alvord’s comparison of the boy to a college professor conveys a tone of surprise and indulgence mixed with conviction that the boy’s friends really were learning that letter. His observation of the success of this interaction presents a stark contrast to Quintilian’s strict precepts concerning the prerequisites of teachers—and even nurses and playmates—of young orators-in-training. Quintilian’s theory of early education would have the young boy surrounded by educated and articulate native speakers of Latin, so that his first models for emulation in speaking are the best. Even early boyhood companions should be as fully knowledgeable as instructors in declamation: “Regarding his *paedagogi*…either they should be thoroughly educated, which I would want to be the primary concern, or let them know themselves to be uneducated [*non eruditos*].

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Nothing is worse than those who, having advanced a short way beyond the first letters, assume an unfounded conviction of their own knowledge” (1.1.8).  

According to Quintilian, the young boy whom Alvord observes teaching the letter T ought not to be trusted to pass on the proper example to his friends because his own education is still in progress. Quintilian’s pedagogy of *imitatio* allows only for the most highly trained teachers.

However, though most of Quintilian’s recommendations regarding *pronuntiatio* and the relationship between virtue and citizenship carried over into the elocutionary training of nineteenth-century America, they underwent significant transformation as the relationship between student and teacher was increasingly mediated by print. Even though the most highly trained elocutionists would have objected to the idea that students could acquire rhetorical finesse from a textbook, in truth it was the goal of many authors to provide a comprehensive guide, with the effect that nearly anyone with some experience in the subject could use the book to teach. The model of the classical teacher’s extensive mastery of the subject was gradually replaced by schoolbooks’ comprehensiveness as print enabled the wide circulation of a few authors’ pedagogical precepts as the model for the nation. The same was true of elementary schoolbooks. As Webster remarks, his standardization of American pronunciation is “designed to introduce uniformity and accuracy of

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30 Harold Edgeworth Butler explains, “There is no translation for paedagogus, the slave-tutor. ‘Tutor,’ ‘guardian,’ ‘governor,’ and similar terms are all misleading. He had the general supervision of the boy, escorted him to school and elsewhere, and saw that he did not get into mischief, but did not, as a rule, direct his studies” (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, footnote to 1.1.8).
pronunciation into the common schools” (qtd. in Venesky 255). A few lessons with Webster’s *Spelling Book* and mastery of the recitation of the tables would have given students the knowledge required to pass on the same lessons to his or her peers. In the context of freedpeople’s early efforts in education it was the very comprehensiveness of schoolbooks that enabled elementary learners to quickly become teachers of their peers.

Alvord’s comparison of the little boy to a college professor opens up a line of inquiry that was under fierce debate as the search for schoolteachers by the Freedmen’s Bureau and other organizations became increasingly difficult over the course of the 1860s. The debate was over whether—and to what extent—African Americans who had been formerly enslaved could be successful teachers in their own communities. Even if schoolbooks enabled learners to help one another with their lessons and to teach one another outside of the schoolroom, the regulation of “official” teachers in classrooms operated by the bureau or the AMA was in full swing, and the expectation was that competent teachers would have been trained in northern academies and colleges. According to Morris, “The black teachers most acceptable to the aid societies were usually Northerners or Southern free Negroes.

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31 According to Williams, “The AMA, for example, used a double standard to exclude blacks. It routinely rejected black women with children while it accepted white women with children as teachers and matrons of institutions. Moreover, even when it sponsored black teachers, the AMA often assigned even highly trained black professionals to undesirable locations. Indeed, one reason the AMA and the Freedmens’ Bureau wanted black teachers at all was to be able to send them to locations where white teachers would not be readily accepted by local whites and into rural, rugged areas where northern white teachers did not want to live” (115).
educated in the North” (100). For example, as reported in the December 15, 1866 issue of Harper’s Weekly, the Zion School for Colored Children in Charleston, South Carolina was run “entirely under the superintendence of colored teachers” and administrators trained in the North like Mr. Van Horn, the principal from New Jersey (790) [Figure 1.6]. Even well educated black teachers faced considerable challenges—the Zion School, for example, “had to provide for a harder set among its pupils, in some cases the refuse of other schools” (790). Formerly enslaved black teachers, too, especially those “untrained” old spectacled preachers and literate domestics Alvord names as likely teachers in schools founded by the freed population, were often not readily accepted by surrounding white communities, or by bureau or AMA officials.

However, “Beginning in 1867 the Freedmen’s Bureau stepped up its efforts to provide educational opportunities for blacks who wished to become teachers” and by 1871 “there were eleven colleges and universities and sixty-one normal schools that were intended especially for blacks” in the South (Morris 91-92). African Americans who were raised under slavery and then trained in colleges or normal schools began to return as teachers to local communities. Williams cites the example of a formerly enslaved teacher returning to his local community as a teacher after three years in the army: “White people in Simpsonville and La Grange, Kentucky, were astonished that Elijah Marrs was a teacher, and a literate one at that, because it was difficult for them to reconcile his blackness and his status as a former slave with qualities that had previously resided only in a particular class of whites” (125). Marrs’ transformation
from slave into teacher provided a model for others in his community to emulate at the same time as it challenged white folks’ assumption that the “qualities” signifying an elocutionary education were unique to the domain of whiteness.

Documentation of how freedpeople applied Quintilian’s *imitandi ratione*—or, the principle of copying—not to teachers of the highest social status, but rather to those who could offer tools for spreading literacy to the highest number of people offers proof of the success of black teachers in both grassroots and official capacities. Black teachers’ increasing numbers, just like the increasing visibility of freedpeople’s literacy and the audibility of their voices in public space, began to transform the social landscape and the very definition of citizenship. If the elocutionists imagined education as a pathway to virtuous citizenship and upward mobility and the American
Tract Society imagined education as a pathway to Christian morality, freedpeople imagined what would happen if their efforts toward education could 1) ensure their full admittance into the rights and protections of citizenship, including suffrage, and 2) transform the very models of ideal citizenship toward which they were told they ought to aspire. Black teachers—from the little boy pointing to the letter T on the signpost to those who were trained in newly established colleges and normal schools—embodied the transformations taking place. African-American learners and teachers embraced Quintilianic precepts in Webster’s *Spelling Book* and other texts as pathways to full public and political participation at the same time as they rejected exclusionary models that limited who could be teachers and who should be emulated. Schoolroom lessons repurposed by freedpeople for self-teaching rejuvenated Quintilianic *imitatio* in a radical democratization of American pedagogy.
CHAPTER TWO

Figural Rhetoric: Anna Julia Cooper’s Ciceronian Transformations

One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman.

—Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice From the South (i)

In the decades following Emancipation, the herculean efforts of black and white teachers and of the Freedmen’s Bureau, missionary associations, and local African American communities led to the establishment of institutions of higher education in the South—many of which are now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—that would help train a cadre of African American teachers for appointments in a rising number of elementary and common schools. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1903 upon looking back on Reconstruction and its eventual collapse, it became clear for the long term that “If the Negro was to learn, he must teach himself, and the most effective help that could be given him was the establishment of schools to train Negro teachers” (60). Black women teachers, from Charlotte Forten Grimke, who taught in freedpeople’s schools in the 1860s, to Anna Julia Cooper, who was a Latin teacher at a Washington, D.C. high school at the turn of the century, played an especially important role in this new social order. Whereas the previous chapter highlighted the pedagogical effects of self-teaching using schoolbooks during the first wave of widespread literacy acquisition among freedpeople, this chapter shows how increasing access to education in Greek and
Latin in the decades following Emancipation transformed the scope of African Americans’ classical rhetorical engagements at a national scale. Direct access to texts by Cicero and other classical authors, as opposed to their mediation via pedagogical texts or contemporary orators, offered formerly enslaved African Americans an even more recognizably authoritative stance from which to demonstrate rhetorical sophistication at a collective, as well as individual, level. Anna Julia Cooper, a teacher, orator, and public intellectual who was born into slavery in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1858, exemplifies the radical potential of this newly available mode of black classical education. Using a set of tactics I term “figural rhetoric,” Cooper adapts Ciceronian rhetorical strategies in her oratory and writing to position the black female body as a powerful source of persuasion.

My analysis situates Cooper’s 1892 collection of essays and speeches, *A Voice From the South*, as a simultaneous inheritor of and challenge to the rhetorical models set forth in Cicero’s rhetorical treatise *de Oratore* (On the Orator). Cooper’s text represents a critical moment in the burgeoning of African American women’s public participation in intellectual debates about higher education and racial uplift—one that preceded the famously polarized disagreement between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington over the relevance of classical education versus industrial training. As Du Bois would later do, Cooper champions the role of the classics in her own educational experience and as a crucial element in the training of African American teachers. For Cooper, however, it is not the exemplary individuals of Du Bois’s male “Talented Tenth” that will uplift the race, but black women in their public and private
roles as teachers and advocates. Educated at St. Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute beginning in 1868, and then later earning her B.A. and M.A. from Oberlin College in 1884 and 1887, and a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in 1924, and devoting forty-some years to teaching Latin and other subjects to African American students, Cooper’s own career constitutes a strong case in point. In *A Voice From the South*, while arguing for African American women’s improved access to higher education, Cooper deploys metonymic, anecdotal, and prosopopoeic figures of speech that strategically adapt and transform Ciceronian rhetorical models to her own advantage. Such a strategy enables her to trade on the intellectual authority invested in rhetorical skill in order to persuade audiences that her words, despite the perceived disadvantages of her race and gender, are worth hearing.

Cicero’s recommendations for the training of the ideal republican orator in *de Oratore* emphasize above all the importance of a broad education, much as Cooper, Du Bois, and other African American intellectuals advocated liberal arts curricula including classical languages at the turn of the twentieth century. For Cicero, the ideal orator is also the ideal citizen, a man whose talents exemplify the best of Roman eloquence and virtue, and whose guiding influence shapes public opinion and policy. In order to best carry out his rhetorical duties, including representing prominent citizens on trial in the law courts and women, children, and freedmen under his protection as patron, Cicero argued that the Roman orator, who must first be a *vir bonus* (good man), must also be well-versed in philosophy and other subjects, not just rhetoric. In fact, Cicero’s model orator can be productively compared to the class of
highly educated professional African American men, the so-called “Talented Tenth,”
that Du Bois promoted as engineers of racial uplift in his advocacy for higher
education. “The Negro race,” he writes, “is going to be saved by its exceptional
men,” and these exceptional men require “intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge
of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of
that Higher Education which must underlie true life” (“The Talented Tenth” 33-34).
Du Bois’s advocacy for a “Talented Tenth” as described in his 1903 essay takes
considerable inspiration from Ciceronian ideals, especially education as the defining
feature of the ideal citizen and that citizen’s responsibility to protect and represent
those under his guidance. In Du Bois’s case these qualities are yoked to the goal of
uplifting the race from poverty and social deprivation.

Anna Julia Cooper’s speeches and essays in A Voice From the South represent,
in contrast to both Cicero’s and Du Bois’s reliance on the education and eloquence of
“exceptional men,” the underutilized but potent capabilities of African American
women as scholars, teachers, public intellectuals, and role models for racial uplift. In
two speeches, “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a
Race” and “The Higher Education of Woman,” she documents black women’s
already crucial role in elementary education in the South and calls on elite men of the
race to support women’s higher education equally alongside men’s: “if there is an
ambitious girl with pluck and brain to take the higher education, encourage her to
make the most of it” (79); “does not this force potential deserve by education and
stimulus to be made dynamic?” (45).
Much of the existing scholarship on *A Voice From the South* focuses on Cooper’s utilization of the idea of virtuous “womanhood” as a tool for advancing her argument for equal educational opportunities. Claudia Tate, for example, points to Cooper’s implication in “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race” that black women’s “inherently sympathetic and virtuous nature…makes them exceptionally suitable for effecting social reform” (156). Cooper’s most recent editors view her reliance on the category of “womanhood” as more practical than essentialist: Vivian M. May calls it “a form of strategic deployment” that prepares the way for her typical mode of argumentation using “‘masculine’ deductive logic” (69), and Charles Lemert agrees that “Cooper used the *language* of true womanhood to establish a point of communication with those to whom she spoke (white and black alike)” (27, emphasis in original). Critical assessments of the “womanhood” question, while important to debates over Cooper’s reception as a foremother of black feminism, are beyond the scope of the present study, which instead focuses on the black woman orator’s classical rhetorical tactics of persuasion.¹

An exemplary moment in Cooper’s oratorical career was her address at Oberlin’s 1884 commencement ceremony when she graduated with her B.A. Her auditors were not concerned with any over-performance of womanhood, but instead

¹ On Cooper’s relationship to twentieth-century black feminism, see Lemert, who argues that “Cooper’s *Voice from the South* was the first *systematic* working out of the insistence that no one social category can capture the reality of the colored woman” (15); and May, whose *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (2007) situates Cooper as a forerunner of black feminism and theories of intersectionality.
noted her “mannish” speaking style, as she later reported:

Cooper recalls delivering her graduation address, “Strongholds of Reason,” rather “mannishly.” Cooper wrote that she was not interested in “pretending to read an ‘essay’ as a lady properly should,” much to the chagrin of some of Oberlin's women administrators (Cooper, 1941 letter to Alfred Churchill, in Shilton). (May 18)

At Oberlin, Cooper pursued a rigorous classical education, building on her study of Greek and Latin at her previous school, and her commencement address reflects her expertise. According to her letter requesting admission to Oberlin in 1881, Cooper’s education at St. Augustine’s in North Carolina included the following classical texts: “Latin: Caesar, seven books; Virgil’s Aeneid, six books; Sallust’s Cataline and Jugurtha; and a few orations of Cicero;—Greek: White’s first lessons; Goodwin’s Greek Reader, containing selections form Xenephon, Plato, Herodotus and Thucydides; and five or six books of the Iliad (Gabel 1982, 19)” (Alexander 340). At Oberlin, she took at least eight courses in rhetoric and logic, including one on Plato during her senior year (Vogel 87). Despite the fact that Cooper’s decision to pursue the “Gentlemen’s Course” in classical languages and rhetoric at Oberlin had an undeniable effect on her rhetorical style, no scholar has as of yet offered an account of Cooper’s relationship to or adaptation of particular classical texts or rhetoricians.²

² Critics have either listed the classical texts Cooper was familiar with, as documented in the letter above, or addressed her use of classical rhetoric in general terms. For example, Shirley Wilson Logan cites Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca’s summary discussion of arrangement in classical rhetoric in The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation (1969) in her analysis of Cooper’s speeches, but she names no classical authors that Cooper may have been drawing on. Similarly, Todd Vogel suggests that “Cooper built tight deductive arguments using the skills of classical rhetoric she learned in her youth,” but does not present a comparative reading of her rhetoric with particular classical texts (86).
Addressing this underexplored line of inquiry, this chapter brings into direct conversation Cicero’s rhetorical treatise *de Oratore*—which Cooper would likely have read in her classical courses at Oberlin, but whose principles, at least, were certainly familiar to her from her study of Cicero’s orations—and Cooper’s *A Voice From the South*.

The following comparative reading of Cicero and Cooper offers a paradigm for scholarship on rhetoric in the field of black classicism intended as a complement to William W. Cook and James Tatum’s breakthrough chapter on Frederick Douglass in *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (2010), which reads Douglass’s oratorical cadences as influenced by classical periodic style and antithesis as modeled in Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator* (49-91). In addition to expanding on the premise of nineteenth-century black classical rhetoric with a focused comparative study of Cicero and Cooper, my analysis also furthers scholarship on “race” and antiquity by performing a philological reading of Cicero’s *de Oratore* that shows how much the rhetorical treatise has to say about bodily features and bodily performance, with significant ramifications for modern categories of race and gender.³ Cicero’s focus on the ideal orator’s bodily characteristics took on a specifically racial cast to

³ In his books *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and *Before Color Prejudice* (1983), which played an important role in the counterattack against Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, Frank M. Snowden, Jr. refutes the idea that “race” and racial prejudice existed in antiquity as we understand it today. But Snowden’s allied assumption that the set of “Greek and Roman ethnocentric aesthetic preferences” that he admits did exist has had no bearing on legacies of race- and sex-based discrimination does not bear up under a close reading of Cicero’s *de Oratore* and its legacy in nineteenth-century African American rhetoric (31-32).
many nineteenth-century American readers; Cooper’s adaptations of Ciceronian rhetoric must be read alongside this broader legacy.

A compelling discursive link between Cicero and Cooper is their shared recognition of the connections between bodily comportment and persuasive speech. For Cicero, rhetorical success depended upon the correct molding of the idealized body of the male orator: a “proper” body legitimized speech, whereas socially disadvantaged bodies such as those of women, slaves, foreigners, or the disabled, did not. Cicero’s outline of rhetorical persuasion in *de Oratore* rests upon his association between the orator’s ideal body and ideal speech, exemplified by his parallel usage of the word *conformatio* (“configuration” or “figure of speech”) to refer to how the successful orator arranges and conducts his body, words, and morals. For Cooper, rhetorical expertise was an avenue for the introduction of African American women into the contested category of U.S. citizenship: proper speech legitimized historically subjugated bodies. By adapting and transforming Cicero’s figural strategies, Cooper questions prevailing assumptions about who has the proper bodily *conformatio* to be a successful orator and teacher in nineteenth-century America.

The chapter begins with an extended philological reading of Cicero’s *de Oratore* juxtaposed with examples of nineteenth-century American black oratory in a range of contexts, from representations in racist caricature to Frederick Douglass’s speeches and writing. Cicero’s privileging of the merits of natural talent (*ingenium*)—which included intelligence and bodily authority—over learned skills (*ars*) for the Roman orator finds its counterpart in controversies in eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century America over whether black people were “capable” of learning Greek and Latin, or other advanced topics—the suggestion being that the lack of *ingenium* associated with blackness rendered African Americans unsuited for such training. Moving back and forth between Roman law courts and American lecture platforms, the first section sets up *de Oratore* as an influential classical precedent for nineteenth-century perceptions of the body of the black orator.

Anna Julia Cooper’s interventions into these classical and modern oratorical contexts are the focus of the second section, which turns specifically to the body of the black woman orator, who in the case of Cooper is also a teacher and writer. In the set of bodily parameters marked out for the nineteenth-century American public speaker, Douglass, Du Bois, and other “race men” such as Booker T. Washington and the classicist William Sanders Scarborough could rely on the relative bodily privilege of masculinity to help substantiate their rhetorical persuasiveness, but Cooper, like other black women, could not. Alex Black has proposed the figure of the “resonant body” to describe how nineteenth-century black women orators’ and performers’ voices “resound” in audiences’ assessments of their bodies, in many cases marking their transgression into a male “register” or vocal range (620). In a similar body-voice interchange that I call “figural rhetoric,” black women’s oratorical performances cross over into the white male “register” of classical rhetoric, both for purposes of adaptation and subversion. Cooper utilizes Ciceronian techniques that rely on the linked persuasive effects of bodily and rhetorical performance. But whereas Cicero promotes the ideal body as “proof” of rhetorical authority, Cooper
reverses his deductive logic, presenting rhetorical expertise and figurative speech, especially the metonym of voice encoded in her title *A Voice From the South*, as the *conformatio* that matters.

I. Bodily *conformatio* and Rhetorical Self-Fashioning from Cicero to Douglass

Philological analysis of Marcus Tullius Cicero’s recommendations regarding the bodily characteristics of the ideal orator, and of the negative bodily characteristics of persons the orator wishes to discredit, helps set up the rhetorical context in which the body enters the Western tradition as a fundamental component of rhetorical persuasion. In the beginning of *de Oratore*, completed in 55 BCE, Cicero characterizes the treatise as an instruction manual of sorts for his brother Quintus, whom he wishes to convince of the necessity of training and education in the cultivation of oratorical talent (1.5). To succeed in his stated goal, Cicero subsumes his own voice under a dialogic form and circumstance reminiscent of Plato’s *Georgias*. In contrast to Plato, his purpose in proceeding by way of dialogue rather than direct appeal is primarily rhetorical rather than dialectical. After introducing a dialogue between esteemed men as a shaping moment in his own rhetorical formation—“I shall repeat things I heard were once studied in a debate among our most eloquent men, those foremost in every merit” (1.23)⁴—Cicero inserts his own opinions into the voice of L. Licinius Crassus, a prominent statesman and political orator, Cicero’s former mentor, and—along with the distinguished M. Antonius—one

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⁴ All translations of Cicero’s *de Oratore* included in this chapter are my own.
of the most convincingly eloquent interlocutors in *de Oratore*. This rhetorical technique is best characterized as prosopopoeia, a figure in which an absent person is represented as speaking. From the Greek *PROSŌPON* (mask or persona, πρόσωπον), prosopopoeia allows the speaker or author to “put on” different personas. When Cicero states his own views by way of Crassus, in a dialogue whose setting he conceives of as the turbulent year of 91 BCE—just before Crassus’s death and the decade of civil war and political unrest that followed—he places his arguments in the mouth of one of the most respected orators of the generation directly preceding his.

In this way, Cicero amplifies the authority of his voice at the same time as he associates Crassus’s body and voice with his own, implementing an effective transference of respect from Crassus to himself and an intermingling of their combined oratorical reputation in the public eye. Indeed, part of Cicero’s strategy in this prosopopoeic device is to deemphasize his own humble class background and to draw attention to the close parallels between

5 The class status of these distinguished men, and their relatively consonant worldviews, are representative of Cicero’s rhetorical rather than truly dialectical aims in *de Oratore*. As Vittorio V. Hösle points out, “Their social range as well as their age is more restricted than in Plato—they are exclusively Roman gentlemen of the upper class, often elder statesmen, possibly consulares (Atticus being the most conspicuous exception)” (162).

6 Writing in the years leading up to 55 BCE, another period of political turmoil with the rise of the First Triumvirate, Cicero may also have been looking to endorse past orators like Crassus who exemplified what he considered the best interests of the Republic. As Fantham explains, “We cannot directly measure Cicero’s private beliefs about the contemporary state of the government at Rome from the dialogue of Crassus and his circle, whose dramatic date prevents any reference to events after 91”; however, one could “justifiably argue that, if Cicero has been utterly convinced in 55 that the senate and the individual politician would never again have a free voice in directing the state, he could hardly have devoted such care and artistry to presenting an unrealizable model of ordered government” (310).
himself and someone like Crassus, an esteemed statesman who was “most eloquent” and “of the highest rank.” Cicero’s rise to oratorical prominence corresponded with his savvy political choices: “Cicero...had made his name as an advocate, and his political career as a defender of the status quo, the power and properties of the governing and landed classes” (Fantham 55). The quintessential Roman orator was active in the law courts, frequently appearing in defense of prominent public figures and friends, so in a sense his legal function was reiterative of prevailing social values and expectations. In *de Oratore* Crassus represents the true orator as the ideal statesman and citizen: he not only shapes society’s values by means of his oratory, but also leads his fellow citizens up out of disarray into a more orderly existence. He, like a member of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth,” is the truly educated and naturally gifted man who is able to uplift his fellow men into a civilization founded on liberty, civil rights, and protection from danger and unfair exploitation (*de Oratore* 1.31-34 and 1.202). Cicero’s prosopopoec adoption of Crassus’s voice in *de Oratore* undergirds his definition of the orator as an exemplary and successful citizen: Crassus’s class status and confident demeanor throughout the text serve to reinforce Cicero’s own rhetorical authority.

Cicero’s definition of the ideal Roman orator in *de Oratore* has a specifically bodily dimension. For Cicero, Joy Connolly argues, the body is “the target-site for rhetoric’s training and refinement of the self” (131). The successful orator’s body is capable of limitless improvement through training in proper rhetoric and comportment. But bodies that do not conform to a preexisting ideal, bodies marked
by characteristics deemed displeasing, distracting, or socially inferior, are rejected as unfit. As Erik Gunderson notes, for the successful Roman orator like Cicero, “good manliness and performative authority are a mutually reinforcing dyad” (8). The orator must be a vir bonus, a good man, but in order to best exemplify these qualities he must already be performing social authority through his conforming body. The ancient Roman designation of some bodies as inherently capable of rhetorical persuasion, and some not, repeats itself in nineteenth-century America: many white Americans’ racist or condescending attitudes toward black intelligence and rhetorical skill purported to reflect a natural hierarchy, not a socially fabricated one.

Cicero’s reversion to identity-based stereotypes in his rhetorical treatise and in his own forensic oratory operates via a figurative equivalence between ideal bodies and persuasive speech. For example, in an anecdote in de Oratore, Crassus wins a court case against an opponent who is deformis (disabled or disfigured) by characterizing that opponent’s rhetorical capability as a deficient extension of his bodily disfigurement. Crassus’s tactic, which is successful, equates non-ideal bodies with a lack of intellectual skill or moral integrity. As Ann Vasaly demonstrates, Cicero himself employed a similar strategic equation between body and speech in court in order to discredit witnesses who were not citizens or who were of non-Roman ethnicity. For example, to suit his argument in the Pro Fonteio (69 BCE), he characterizes the Gauls’ relationship to the Romans as one of resentment spurred by
ethnic predisposition to anger and brutality. Cicero’s indictments of people with bodies that did not match that of the ideal Roman citizen bespeak his preoccupation with the role of the body in oratorical success. The same privileging of the body of the Roman citizen as opposed to that of women, children, freedmen, slaves, and noncitizens, is apparent in the system of patronage in which male citizens would act and speak on behalf his dependents, who could not represent themselves in court except in extreme circumstances. Here, again, we see parallels with nineteenth-century America: prior to Emancipation, many states’ laws prevented African Americans, slave or free, from testifying against white citizens in court. Such policies enacted a correlation between blackness and untrustworthy speech—with historical roots in Roman slave law and Ciceronian bodily conformatio—that carried over into all aspects of daily life, from abuse and violence against black people for suspected crimes to the white abolitionist practice of “vetting” the authenticity of black slave narratives.

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7 Vasaly explains Cicero’s deployment of ethnic stereotypes in the Pro Fonteio: “The repetition in different forms of the words iracundia (15), iratus (18, 21, 36), cupidus (21, 29, 32), temere (29), libido (4, 36, 49), immanis (31, 33, 41, 44), and crudelis (43) in connection with the Gauls further reinforces this image of a wild and threatening race, awed by neither men nor gods, consumed with a desire for revenge against their conquerors” (194).

8 As Alan Watson explains in Roman Slave Law (1987), Roman slaves were res mancipi, property acquired by formal transfer, but occasionally they were recognized as persons who could give testimony in court: only after being tortured, and never as witnesses against their masters (84). Though Roman slaves were of many different ethnicities (many were enslaved after being defeated in battle), the legal precedent is relevant to American slavery: distrust of slave testimony historically rooted in Roman slave law took on added racial dimensions in American courtrooms. For information on the role of Roman Civil Law in the nineteenth-century U.S., see Michael Hoeflich, Roman and Civil Law and the Development of Anglo-American Jurisprudence in the
According to Crassus’s instruction in *de Oratore*, a Roman orator’s success depends on *ingenium* (natural talent) as well as *ars* (technique or art), but he emphasizes the former: “*ingenium ad dicendum vim affere maximam*” (natural talent adds the greatest power to speaking, 1.113). Without a certain degree of *ingenium*, he suggests, no amount of *ars* can sway an audience. Crassus’s emphasis on specific physical attributes associated with *ingenium* suggests that he and his auditors have a certain kind of ideal body in mind: a body equipped with features specifically described as innate (“*dona naturae*” and “*nascuntur,*” 1.114) and unobtainable by training alone. These attributes include “the loosening of the tongue, the resonance of the voice, the lungs, strength, and a certain configuration and shape of the whole face and body” (*linguae solutio, vocis sonus, latera, vires, conformatio quaedam et figura totius oris et corporis*, 1.114). *Vocis sonus* and *vires* in particular refer to resoundingly masculine attributes: the male voice was the vehicle of public speech and thus was considered the most *sonus*; *vires* refers to intellectual or bodily “vigour,” and this forcefulness is coded as masculine because of its implicit connotation of sexual violence—the secondary definition of *vis* (the singular form of *vires*) is “a force used to obtain sexual gratification” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*).

Crassus’s description also has ethnic implications. *Linguae solutio* implies the smoothly flowing speech of a Roman citizen rather than the stumbling and accented syllables of a foreigner.

Because of the indeterminate descriptor *quaedam*, both *conformatio* (configuration) and *figura* (shape) resist a definitive reading in terms of implied ethnic or gendered characteristics, yet the contextual usages of *conformatio* throughout *de Oratore* point toward a correspondence between successful speech and conforming bodies that suggests that *conformatio* in this instance refers to the masculine and aesthetically conforming bodies of powerful Roman citizens such as Crassus or Cicero. Furthermore, because he uses *os* (face) rather than *vultus* (expression) it is clear that Cicero is referring not to facial “expressions” and bodily “gestures,” but rather certain inborn qualities.\(^9\) “In the final analysis,” Connolly suggests, “the orator fulfills his virtuous potential in a way that no one else can because he lives his natural superiority in his very body, a manly and authoritative Roman body” (112).

Nineteenth-century Americans also considered the orator’s body a focal point for determining rhetorical authority. This was a definitively Ciceronian belief that, as the previous chapter documents, was revitalized through elocutionary education’s emphasis on *pronuntiatio*, or delivery, the performative counterpart to rhetorical and linguistic skill. Because delivery was such an important element of elocution, many Americans’ attitudes toward African American education before and after Emancipation boiled down to the belief that “book learning”—i.e. classical education

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\(^9\) As Elaine Fantham explains, “There are differences in the usage of *os* and *vultus* which have been brought out clearly in a recent study by Bettini. While *os* may allude to the mouth as organ of speech, Cicero mainly uses it for the natural face or features, in contrast with *vultus*, the expression of mood or emotion, and occasionally of character” (295). Fantham is citing M. Bettini, *Le Orecchie di Hermes* (Turin, 2000), 317-36.
alone—was not enough to transform a black man, let alone a black woman, into an orator. Racist caricatures of African Americans as aspiring, but ultimately incapable, orators, teachers, and citizens circulated popularly, often as printed broadsides. In such images, the black man takes on the trappings—often literally the clothing—of elite culture, but the dialogue and other visual cues reveal him to be a fraud or a laughing-stock. For example, in “A Black Lecture on Language,” number 6 of a series of “Follit’s Black Lectures” published in 1827, a black professor wearing spectacles and academic cap and gown displays on the desk before him physical specimens of “tongues” labeled variously “foreign tongues,” “mother tongue,” “vulgar tongue,” etc. [Figure 2.1]. The accompanying text begins with the lecturer’s voice, represented through a distorted rendering of black vernacular speech as the “woice ob larning”:

Niggars all dat got disarning,
Listen to de woice ob larning.
While me tell, as is my wont,
What me know—(Aside)—and what me dont.

While the lecturer claims the learnedness associated with training in rhetoric and classical languages, the grotesquely displayed “foreign tongues” on his desk—perhaps among them Greek and Latin—suggest that he fundamentally misunderstands what language “larning” is about. The added aside, “and what me
The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

dont,” confirms to nineteenth-century readers the supposed incongruity of a “black lecturer.”

Just like “A Black Lecture on Language,” with its title emphasizing the racial descriptor, conveys the impression that it is the man’s blackness that limits his capacity to give a proper lecture, for Cicero, aspiring orators whose bodies did not match a preconceived notion of “Roman-ness” and elite masculinity were considered equally unsuccessful. Wrapped up in the word conformatio—which is a quality Cicero requires of the successful orator—are implications of bodily, moral, and rhetorical suitability that continue to resonate for nineteenth century Americans.

Derived from conformare (to shape, fashion, train, or bring into harmony),

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conformatio can be translated in three distinct ways: as a “configuration” of thoughts, words, voice, or other features; as a person’s moral “constitution or character”; or, in rhetoric, as a “figure of speech,” or “prosopopoeia” (Oxford Latin Dictionary). In de Oratore, the word conformatio appears only six times, but its occurrences reveal that while Cicero uses it primarily to describe patterns of words and thoughts in rhetoric, he also employs it to define a set of ideal physical attributes—specifically of the voice, face, and body—through which moral character is secondarily implied. The “configuration” of a man’s moral character corresponds contextually to the features and motions of his face and body and the rhetorical arrangement of his words—his “figures of speech”—thus playing on all three valences of the above definition. This range of contexts for conformatio is not exceptional, but in de Oratore Cicero’s parallelism in its usage (modified by genitives: vocis, corporis, oris, verborum, sententiarum) signals an assumed affinity between the ideal orator’s exterior appearance, his moral character, and his speech.

Cicero’s most frequent usage of conformatio appears in the context of discussing the proper arrangement of words and thoughts in rhetoric and for purposes of memory. These discussions, while drawing from the primary definition, “configuration,” invoke the rhetorical valence of “figure of speech,” and quite likely serve as a primary basis for this definition (Oxford Latin Dictionary). After listing a catalogue of rhetorical devices, Crassus says, “these are the things…that light up [inluminent] oratory using thoughts [sententiis] and configurations of words
Such occurrences of conformatio modified by verborum draw on the conventional register—“configurations”—in a way that suggests an alternative, yet familiar connotation: the rhetorical concept of the “figure.” Thus verborumque conformationibus can also be rendered as “using figures of speech,” a translation that hints at the rhetorical context behind Cicero’s deployment of conformatio. The overlap between these two possible translations, “configurations of words” and “figures of speech,” brings the orator’s oral performance and rhetorical technique into convergence: his voice simultaneously encompasses and represents the pure sounds of the words as they emerge from his lips as well as the intention and symbolic value behind the syllables. This transformation of sound into speech and word into figure lends the power of the aural and the symbolic to the body of the speaker. An audience member not only sees the orator’s body, but also hears his sounds and perceives his meaning. When the orator employs a rhetorical figure of speech, that figure becomes constitutive of the aural and visual data that otherwise make up his literal “figure” in the perceptions of an audience member. That orator holds the power of rhetoric as a lens, or perhaps a veil, through which others may or may not perceive the “truth” of his performance: in other words, he becomes a figure.

11 See also de Oratore 1.151: “the joining and arrangement of words [collocatio conformatioque verborum] itself is made perfect through writing, in a manner and rhythm and measure proper for oratory, not poetry.”
12 See May and Wisse, footnote 277: “Cicero’s…terminology (conformatio and related words; also lumen), though apparently not technical in a strict sense…evokes the technical concept of figures, well known to his readers from standard rhetorical theory” (287).
Because Cicero’s ideal orator understands the internal and external continuity of the “figure,” he fashions the *conformatio* of his words and of his body in a parallel mode. Auditors are attuned to the physical appearance of the orator in the same way as they are to the visually resonant rhetorical “figure.”

Indeed, as in the very many things nature itself has wondrously created, so it is in oratory, that those things which contain in themselves the greatest utility [*maximam utilitatem*] have also the same amount of worth [*dignitatis*], and often even beauty [*venustatis*]…. Now turn your mind to the appearance [*formam*] and shape [*figuram*] of men or even other animals. You will find no part of the body attached without some necessity and the whole appearance made perfect as if by art [*arte*], not chance [*casu*]. (3.178-9)\(^\text{13}\)

In the orator’s dual performance of body and language, the visual value of the figurative—physical and rhetorical—governs the efficacy of speech. Audiences rely on the visual *conformatio* of the orator’s body to mirror and prefigure the *conformatio* of his words.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Crassus’s characterization of the body as a work of art re-introduces a slippage between *ars* and *natura*, or a question about how the body comes into being. As noted above, Connolly proposes that Cicero fluctuates between two models: “the body as a social object” and “the body as rendered meaningful as it is experienced, enmeshed as it is in networks of significations” (140). This fluctuation is central to how Cicero conceives of the body of the orator: ideal bodies are open to the self-fashioning required of the orator, while non-ideal bodies are subject to external significations that exclude them from oratory.

\(^\text{14}\) For Cicero, the three valences of *conformatio*—as applied to body and voice, moral character, and rhetorical speech—signify not only the convergence of the literal and rhetorical “figure,” but also a correspondence between form and worth. *Forma* (form or appearance), the root noun behind the verbs *formo* and *conformo*, and also behind *conformatio*, commands an extensive semantic range, yet three definitions in particular suggest a philosophical basis for the three-part nature of Cicero’s usage of *conformatio*. The first definition to note is the usage of *forma* in relation to the outward appearance of the human body, especially to indicate the beautiful or the ugly; the second refers to “the shape of a thing as essential to the performance of its functions”—in other words, its utility; and the third presents *forma* as a translation of the Greek *IDEA* (ιδέα) in reference to the Platonic philosophy of ideal forms (Oxford
Cicero’s contextual usages of *conformatio* in relation to bodily attributes (modified by *oris et corporis* and *vocis*) in *de Oratore* concretizes this desired or ideal mirroring between body and speech. The ideal oratorical body exhibits physical traits “born unto” (*nascuntur* 1.114) it, the now familiar *linguae solutio*, *vocis sonus*, *latera*, *vires*, *conformatio quaedam et figura totius oris et corporis* (1.114). In this instance his deployment of *conformatio* in the context of bodily appearance (“a certain configuration and shape of the whole face and body”) exemplifies his later statements about the correlation between *venustas* (beauty) and *utilitas* (utility). The body whose appearance is pleasing is considered the most efficacious in speech. In theory, *conformatio quaedam et figura totius oris et corporis* could refer to any set of facial features or bodily statures. But Crassus’s subsequent examples of bodies unfit for oratory prove that Cicero has a certain kind of *conformatio* in mind, a body that belongs to the ideal Roman citizen whose gender and class status befits him for leadership.

Later in the same passage, Crassus explains “there are certain men so hesitant [*haesitantes*] in their tongue or so inharmonious [*absoni*] in their voice or so rough [*vasti*] and rustic [*agrestes*] in the countenance and movement of the body [*vultu motuque corporis*], so that, even if they flourish with natural talents [*ingeniis*] and skill [*arte*], nevertheless they cannot enter the ranks of orators” (1.115). Crassus highlights certain qualities of tongue and voice (*haesitantes* and *absoni*) that

*Latin Dictionary*). Hösle documents Cicero’s admiration of Plato, seen especially in his adoption of Plato’s dialogic style and his “enormous originality in creating a Latin philosophical language” (147).
disqualify potential orators, and, as noted above, his attention to the smoothness and resonance of the voice suggests that he prefers native Latin speakers. Furthermore, the characteristics (vasti and agrestes) associated with these non-ideal bodies are quite specific, summoning a host of implications about citizenship status, urbanity, class, and possibly even ethnicity. Vastus refers primarily to large expanses of desolate or uncivilized landscapes or, secondarily, to persons “untidy,” “coarse,” or “unrefined” in their appearance; agrestis connotes qualities associated with a rustic life in the fields, so for example a person of “boorish,” “coarse,” “uncivilized,” or “unsophisticated” manner (Oxford Latin Dictionary). These associative traits characterize those specifically excluded from oratory in this quote as the kind of men who live in the countryside, are of a lower class status, and who may not even be Roman citizens. All of these qualities recall the distorted vernacular dialect and grotesque “tongues” of the caricatured professor in “A Black Lecture on Language.”

Vasaly’s scholarship on cases that Cicero argued by discrediting the testimony of non-Roman witnesses provides further evidence of Cicero’s uses of bodily nonconformity as a tool for questioning moral integrity and ingenium. Just as he characterizes the Gauls as barbaric and resentful of Roman rule in the Pro Fonteio, in the Pro Scauro (54 BCE), Cicero issues a blanket refutation of the testimony of the Sardinians, whom he deems degraded by “racial interminglelings” (43: transfusionibus coacuisse) with Africans and Phoenicians, the latter being “the most deceptive of all
“fallacissimum” (Vasaly 196). In lieu of a more painstaking refutation of individual testimony, “Cicero…. declares that in this case in which the [Sardinian] witnesses are all of ‘one complexion, one voice, and one nation’ (19: unus color, una vox, una natio), he will not attempt to take them on individually but will confront the whole army in a single great encounter” (Vasaly 195). Here “racial” and ethnic stereotypes serve as the most efficient form of discrediting the Sardinian witnesses so that Cicero can foreground his argument in favor of Scaurus rather than spending valuable time quibbling over evidence. The kind of geographical and ethnic stereotypes Cicero is drawing on here are not equivalent with racism as it developed and emerged in the modern era alongside colonization, slavery, and discourses of scientific classification, but they are a telling precedent.

The example of Lamia, Crassus’s opponent, introduces another body whose physical characteristics, in Cicero’s mind, exclude him from successful rhetorical persuasion. Crassus’s critique of Lamia hinges on his implicit correlation between Lamia’s disfigured or disabled body and a lack of talent:

Moreover, words were ironically inverted when Crassus was speaking in front of the judge Marcus Perperna for Aculeo, and Lucius Aelius Lamia, disfigured [deformis], as you know, was present against Aculeo. When Lamia kept interrupting in an offensive way, Crassus said, “Let us hear the pretty little boy [pulchellum puerum].” When this was laughed at, Lamia said, “I was not able to fashion [fingere] for myself my own figure [formam], but I was able to fashion my talent [ingenium].” So then Crassus said, “Let us hear the eloquent one [disertum].” At this the laughter was a good deal more uproarious. (2.262)

15 The translations in this and the following sentence are Vasaly’s. I reproduce them here to reflect her contextualizing argument that Cicero’s bodily demarcations in the Pro Scauro have a “racial” cast.
Caesar’s use of the word *deformis* to describe Lamia plays on a similar range of meanings as *conformatio*. *Deformis* can connote an aesthetic, functional, or moral lack, and Caesar’s deployment of the word in conjunction with Crassus’s biting remarks operates especially on the first two levels, characterizing Lamia as simultaneously “deviating from a normal or acceptable standard of beauty, misshapen, unshapely, ugly” and “offensive to good taste…inappropriate, unbecoming, unseemly” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). The assumed parallelism between *pulchellum puerum*, a diminutive, and *disertum* in Crassus’s syntactically parallel statements operates through ironic inversion of meaning as an assertion that Lamia’s lack of bodily *conformatio* automatically signals a lack of eloquence, and thus a lack of worth as an orator. He refutes Lamia’s claim that he was able to fashion his own *ingenium* when he solicits the laughter of his auditors. In examples such as these, Cicero presents *ingenium* as innate and embodied, not open to self-fashioning. The performed authority of Crassus’s “ideal” body is thus reinforced by comparison to a non-ideal body, much as socially constructed assumptions about “race”—including artificial linkages between physical features, especially skin color, and intellectual and moral capabilities—developed over the course of centuries of trans-Atlantic slavery as a way not only of defining “blackness,” but also reciprocally demarcating “whiteness.”

In nineteenth-century America, Emancipation constituted a landmark improvement in the availability of education and its accompanying social benefits to African Americans, but racist attitudes dependent on stereotypes of black intellectual
inferiority shifted to compensate. Whereas early in the century the classically educated African American man or woman was often represented as a rarity or a “fraud” like the black professor with tongue samples in “A Black Lecture on Language,” in the 1870s through the fin de siècle increased numbers of classically trained African American students triggered a subtle modification of racist rhetoric: detractors began attacking black peoples’ moral character and critical thinking rather than technical know-how.

The change in strategy can be traced through the afterlife of a comment by the influential South Carolina politician and orator John C. Calhoun, who in 1833 “was reported to have said to Samuel E. Sewall and David Lee Child, two Boston attorneys, that ‘if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man’ ” (Ronnick 7). Calhoun was, along with Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, a member of the so-called “Great Triumvirate” of mid-nineteenth-century politicians whose performance of social and political authority echoed that of powerful orators and statesmen of the triumvirates of the late Roman republic, such as Cicero or Caesar. His wide-reaching proclamation of the inseparability of “manhood” with knowing the Greek syntax has been remembered by contemporary scholars of black classicism as one of the defining features of early-nineteenth-century attitudes regarding African American classical education (Ronnick 17, Cook and Tatum 95). In 1881, with the publication of his Greek grammar textbook, First Lessons in Greek: Adapted to the Greek Grammar of Goodwin and Hadley and Designed as an Introduction to Xenophon’s ‘Anabasis’ and
Similarly Greek, the African American classicist William Sanders Scarborough was lauded for disproving Calhoun’s insinuation that black people could not master the Greek tongue (Scarborough 76-78). As Anna Julia Cooper remarked, “That one black man has written a Greek grammar is enough to answer Calhoun’s sneer” (261).

But prejudice ran even deeper than Calhoun’s equation implied, persisting in new forms long after Scarborough’s accomplishment. An editorial published circa 1903 in a “prominent Southern journal” decades after the establishment of classical curricula in many African American schools documents disbelief—no longer in black scholars’ technical ability to learn Greek and Latin, but rather in their ability to appreciate the teachings of classical antiquity:

The experiment that has been made to give the colored students classical training has not been satisfactory. Even though many were able to pursue the course, most of them did so in a parrot-like way, learning what was taught, but not seeming to appropriate the truth and import of their instruction, and graduating without sensible aim or valuable occupation for their future. The whole scheme has proved a waste of time, efforts, and the money of the state. (qtd. in Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk 61)

The sentiments voiced here prove even more injurious than Calhoun’s statement because the commenter’s characterization of black students as “parrot-like” imitators unable to absorb the “truth and import” of classical values was much harder to combat in a culture still rife with racist assumptions regarding black morals and character, even if intellectual capacity could be definitively demonstrated by a text like Scarborough’s. What it comes down to in this quote is the writer’s disbelief that the black man can become a vir bonus, a public leader and representative on the order of Cicero’s ideal orator, one whose breadth of knowledge and erudition is also
reflected in the natural ability to know what to do with it, and in sound morals and a heart committed to the welfare of the people.

As we have seen, Cicero also carefully guards the definition of such a representative man. For example, in a legal case like the Pro Flacco (59 BCE), in which demonstrating Roman moral superiority over Greeks is paramount to discrediting Greek testimony and winning the case, Cicero accounts for the famed erudition of the Greeks with another stereotype, that of their “duplicity” (Vasaly 191). As Vasaly summarizes, in this speech Cicero calls his Greek contemporaries “a people without scruples, a race of actors…[whose] failings were not of intellect but of character, so that even the talents for which Cicero had praised them at the beginning of the speech—cleverness, loquacity, verbal facility—formed part of the argument against them” (200).16 Here indeed is a Roman precedent for maligning character when intelligence cannot be faulted. A too quick facility with rhetoric rather than its grounding moral principles becomes just as unsuitable as no learning at all.

Similarly, by Cooper and Du Bois’s day, when many black scholars had proven their abilities in Greek and Latin, the terms of the debate over African American classical education—as spearheaded by opponents and countered by advocates—had shifted from the question of technical ability to one of moral capaciousness and strength of character. A persistent source of doubt in nineteenth-century assessments of African

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16 Cicero’s tactics of persuasion here should be of course distinguished from his overall admiration of Greek philosophy and rhetoric, especially Plato. When convenient for the sake of argument, he differentiates between the civilized Greeks of the past and the “over civilized”—or “duplicitous”—Greeks of the present (Vasaly 200).
American educational progress remained skin color, or lack of bodily *conformatio*,
the third element of the Ciceronian body-speech-moral character triad, and this
proved doubly problematic for African American women who could draw on neither
the bodily privilege of maleness nor whiteness for rhetorical persuasion.

A brief look at performances of bodily *conformatio* by Frederick Douglass,
the quintessential African American male orator of the nineteenth century and who
Cordelia Ray later called “Our Cicero,” helps contextualize a culture of self-
fashioning rooted in Ciceronian oratory and American Transcendentalism that
prominent “race men” like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were still
employing even after Anna Julia Cooper set forth her recuperative agenda of
rhetorical advocacy on behalf of “race women” in *A Voice from the South*, to which
we will soon turn. The masculine self-fashioning of Douglass and others, I argue,
operates as a suturing of gender performance over the perceived gaps of racial
difference, a strategy that borrows from the strongly gender-identified language of
Ciceronian rhetorical persuasion. In their analysis of Douglass’s deployment of
classical rhetorical techniques acquired through second-hand or “deutero-learning”
and a lifetime of practice, Cook and Tatum foreground Douglass’s dual performance
of eloquence and moral character, qualities that helped ensure his oratorical success
in nineteenth-century America as much as they would have in ancient Rome: “For
Douglass…mastery of oratory becomes what Cicero and every other preceptor in
classical rhetoric hoped to convey: more than a sign of educational achievement,
elloquent speech is a mark of superior moral character” (73). When considered in the
context of the accusations of African American students “parroting” Greek and Latin as in the example above, Douglass’s performance of “superior moral character” in his speaking engagements—like a true vir bonus—becomes even more important than an extensive classical education. What Cook and Tatum do not dwell on in the examples that follow, however, is the extent to which Douglass’s ability to project moral excellence and eloquence is a product of his masculine physical presence.

Garrison’s preface to the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845) demonstrates the active workings of Cicero’s rhetorical legacy in practice. Garrison’s “legitimization” of Douglass’s autobiographical slave narrative hinges on his description of Douglass as conforming to Ciceronian models of overlapping bodily, rhetorical, and moral excellence. He describes his initial assessment of Douglass in Nantucket in 1841 in the following way: “There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact—in intellect richly endowed—in natural eloquence a prodigy—in soul manifestly ‘created but a little lower than the angels’—yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave” (x). Here Douglass’s “natural eloquence” (what Cicero would call ingenium) is linked to his bodily presence, but not specifically to his “race,” which is signaled late in the list of attributes by his status as a slave (“yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave”). Garrison’s emphasis on Douglass’s masterful “physical proportion and stature” anticipates and displaces objections to his race by substituting signifiers of masculine bodily privilege as reflections of rhetorical worth. A Ciceronian correspondence between
(masculine) body, speech, and moral character pulls Douglass within a protective circle of rhetorically privileged bodies.

Another striking example appears in Douglass’s 1853 novella, “The Heroic Slave,” which recounts the fictionalized story of Madison Washington, who was leader of a slave mutiny aboard the slave ship Creole in 1841, but who in Douglass’s story takes on many “recognizable” qualities of Douglass himself (Cook and Tatum 78). As Cook and Tatum recount, Douglass opens his novella with a curious circumstance in which a white man, Mr. Listwell (whose name is indeed fitting), overhears Madison speaking in the forest and is impressed by the richness his voice. Without having seen the orator, but “intensely curious to know what thoughts and feelings, or, it might be, high aspirations, guided those rich and mellow accents,” Listwell becomes entranced with Madison’s passionate soliloquy, which commences with an apostrophe to a cluster of nearby birds which “live free” while he does not (176-77). Already convinced by the vocal performance, Listwell’s gradual realization of the man’s race and his status as a slave does not change his initial judgment of character. Madison’s “voice, that unfailing index of the soul,” draws Listwell into his sympathies, and when his black body is finally revealed, the convergence of the aural with the visual proves to have a greater impact than if they had never been separated. Cook and Tatum emphasize Douglass’s awareness of his own rhetorical self-fashioning in this example (81); reviewers of his speeches rarely failed to mention Douglass’s powerful speaking voice, as it was a considerable positive asset. Tellingly, I would add, while the premise of the Madison-Listwell anecdote is the
privileging of the persuasive power of voice over and above visual assessments of
“race,” voice is not a disembodied quality. Madison’s voice, like Douglass’s, signals
masculinity straightaway, but not necessarily race (Listwell doesn’t “hear” race, he
sees it), and so again a reliance on masculinity, figured here through voice, provides
the necessary foundation for the success of the African American orator.

Len Gougeon argues that the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s
case of the “self-reliant man,” and of the similarly self-reliant “anti-slave,”
influenced Douglass’s rhetorical self-fashioning. In turn, Douglass (along with
Toussaint L’Ouverture) was likely an ideal model for the “anti-slave” that Emerson
describes in “his most extensive and important antislavery statement,” a speech titled
“Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” delivered in Concord,
Massachusetts on August 1, 1844 (Gougeon 622). Emerson, influenced by
Ciceronian rhetorical training during his education at Boston Latin School, Harvard
College, and Harvard Divinity School, had in 1841 introduced his famous concept of
“self-reliance,” the idea that every man need only look within himself to maximize
his full potential. Emerson’s self-reliant man echoes in many ways Cicero’s ideal
orator and vir bonus, but Emerson’s ideal man, embodying a fundamental tenet of
American Transcendentalism, originality, is even more strongly marked by ingenium
(natural talent) as opposed to ars (technique or art). “Imitation is suicide,” Emerson
writes, and the self-reliant man “must take himself for better, for worse, as his
portion,” and in doing so best fulfill his unique potential (1160). The “anti-slave,”
according to Emerson, is a man who psychologically rejects his current or former
status as slave, living out the principles of self-reliance despite his external circumstances. As Gougeon points out, Douglass’s own life story—and his rhetorical shaping of it in speeches and his written narratives, especially in the dramatic climax of his fight with the slave driver Covey and his subsequent escape from slavery—is the epitome of that of the self-reliant anti-slave (635).

However, despite a common foundation of strong moral character and *ingenium*, important differences emerge when considering Emerson’s self-reliant man (an adapted version of Cicero’s ideal orator) vis-à-vis the African American orator as exemplified by Douglass. Emerson’s ideal man finds his power in bodily self-control and individual genius with little regard for potential extenuating circumstances relating to race, sex, or lack of educational opportunity (Emerson’s call for the self-educating, self-emancipating “anti-slave” on the model of Douglass or Toussaint is quite a tall order indeed). Douglass, even as he performs a version of self-reliant *ingenium* in his most popular lyceum lecture “Self-Made Men,” calls attention to these lacunae by suggesting a reprioritization of Ciceronian *ars* for those who have been denied access to education, and for those whose non-white bodies do not automatically signal “natural talent” to dominant white ideology. As Angela G. Ray notes, Douglass’s “self-presentation” as a self-made man in this lecture, which he delivered on numerous occasions between 1859 and 1893, “made his own oratorical performance an enactment of the concept” (638), but he did not fully embrace “self-improvement ideology, which unquestioningly assumed access to the means of self-improvement” (635). Instead, especially in later versions of the speech, he insisted on
Americans’ responsibility to “Give the negro fair play,” particularly in terms of education, and not merely bare-bones bootstraps ideology (557). Thus, even as he champions exemplary self-made African American men who could be compared to a Ciceronian orator, implicitly including himself among them, Douglass recognizes the shortcomings of an ideology of self-reliance that requires the African American man to over-perform masculine and agonistic self-fashioning to mitigate circumstances of oppression.

The gendered self-fashioning that for Douglass demonstrated strength of character and masculine bodily conformatio remained a viable strategy for black men seeking similar public roles in following decades, including the cadre of classically trained black male professionals that Du Bois imagined as the “Talented Tenth.” Even before Du Bois introduced the concept, it was black male teachers, preachers, orators, and other professionals who acted as the most publicly visible “representatives” of the race. In another refashioning of Ciceronian ideals, these men performed both ars and ingenium, using masculine cultural authority to suture over the perceived disadvantages of blackness. Classically trained black teachers, especially, were expected to be male, because it was men who were encouraged in pursuit of the classics in the rhetoric- and logic-heavy “gentlemen’s courses” and whose achievements in that area were most recognized. As Scarborough wrote in his

Douglass argued his point in the following way: “It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them…. Should the American people put a school house in every valley of the South and a church on every hill side and supply the one with teachers and the other with preachers, for a hundred years to come, they would not then have given fair play to the negro” (“Self-Made Men,” 557-8).
autobiography, his students at Wilberforce University looked up to him as an exemplary role model because of his *First Lessons in Greek*: “their delight and pride were unbounded as they took up for study their own professor’s book” (78).

Scarborough had submitted his book to press without disclosing his race, but he had had no need to use a penname to conceal his sex as a woman likely would have for such a “male” area of expertise, and he gained the full support of the publisher once his identity was known. While celebrating achievements such as Scarborough’s, Anna Julia Cooper recognized the pitfalls of championing only black men as racial “representatives” and architects of uplift. Why not, she asked, support the women, too, as equally potent social actors?

Cooper addressed her comments to diverse audiences, especially with the publication of *A Voice From the South*, but her best-known speeches were particularly addressed either to elite black men—the intellectuals, educators, and clergymen who were already beneficiaries of the kind of education she advocated for black women—or to women. In both “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race,” delivered to a group of black male Episcopalian preachers in 1886, and “The Higher Education of Women” addressed to the convention of the American Conference of Educators in 1890, she called on classically trained black men to see that “money be raised and scholarships be founded in our colleges and universities for self-supporting, worthy young women, to offset and balance the aid that can always be found of boys who will take the theology” (79). Drawing on her own educational experience at St. Augustine’s, she
recalls her outlier status in the Greek class taught “for the candidates for the ministry” and the talented female student’s need to support herself by “teaching in the summer and working after school hours to keep up with her board bills” only to be faced with “incredulity and dismay” when she expressed a desire to go to college (77-78). In these speeches, which appear as the first two essays in *A Voice From the South*, Cooper calls on elite black men—heretofore the primary agents of Ciceronian education and social power—to recognize the potential of women as scholars, teachers, and exemplary representatives of the race.

Her rhetorical machinations extended also to incorporating the classically educated black woman teacher into existing models of black female virtue. In a speech delivered to the 1893 World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago, titled “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation: A Response to Fannie Barrier Williams,” Cooper documented the progress African American women teachers had already achieved. Whereas Fannie Barrier Williams, who spoke before her, had promoted “social respectability” and “conservative Victorian gender roles” as the qualities by which

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18 In this colorful anecdote Cooper employs a characteristic ambiguity over whether each detail happened to her, or to the rhetorical “Black Woman of the South,” in this case perhaps a classmate. She begins by describing her experience in the Greek class using first person, but then shifts to third: “a self-supporting girl had to struggle on…. [T]ill one such girl flared out and told the principal ‘the only mission opening before a girl in his school was to marry one of those candidates’…. [A]t last that same girl announced her desire and intention to go to college” (77-78). May recounts that Cooper did indeed receive some scholarship support for tuition, but that she had to augment her income by “beg[inning] her lifetime of work as an educator around the age of ten as a gifted peer teacher” (15). See the following section for analysis of Cooper’s rhetorical uses of personal anecdote and the figure of the “Black Woman of the South.”
black women would help promote racial uplift, Cooper took a more practical approach (Logan 105). Speaking about the state of education in the South since Emancipation, she emphasized how much black women had already assisted in educational efforts: “Two and one-half million colored children have learned to read and write, and twenty-two thousand nine hundred and fifty-six colored men and women (mostly women) are teaching in these schools” (Cooper, “Intellectual Progress,” 203). In other speeches and essays she nodded to the feminine “respectability” championed by Williams and others as a complementary source of female social and moral influence, but one that, she maintains, is most effective when accompanied by the broad training of higher education: “The earnest well trained Christian young woman, as teacher, as a home-maker, as wife, mother, or silent influence even, is as potent a missionary agency among our people as is the theologian; and I claim that at the present stage of our development in the South she is ever more important and necessary” (A Voice From the South 79).

Throughout her life, Cooper worked diligently as a teacher and educator, giving back to local black communities through her skills in instruction and assiduous leadership, embodying the ideal representative black woman she advocates on behalf of in A Voice From the South. As a student at St. Augustine’s she was a peer tutor from age 10 onward, and she later taught languages and mathematics at Wilberforce University, St. Augustine’s, and Lincoln University and for over thirty years was a Latin teacher at Washington, D.C.’s M Street High School (later known as Dunbar High School). As May details, Cooper’s efforts on behalf of classical education for
black students at M Street were outstanding, especially when she was principal from 1901 to 1906:

during her tenure as principle Cooper sought and received accreditation for M Street from elite universities in the Northeast (such as Harvard), which meant that graduates would no longer have to take entrance examinations to attend university; their M Street education was considered sufficiently rigorous to meet the most stringent entry standards. Cooper also refused to use the ‘racially derogatory textbooks’ mandated by the school district (Chateauvert 262); independently, she revised the curriculum and ordered new books. (24)

Cooper’s protest over textbooks recalls the conflicts over divergent discourses embedded in freedpeople’s elementary schoolbooks examined in the previous chapter. Four decades later, the stakes of education for African Americans were equally high. For her clash with the school district over the curriculum, which the district wanted to follow in the path of Booker T. Washington’s push for industrial training, Cooper was dismissed for a period of a few years (1906-11) until the conflict had blown over, at which point she returned with the same verve as ever.

At the same time as she pushed hard for the availability of classical curricula, Cooper also recognized the practical benefits of nurturing industrial training as a baseline for collective racial uplift. She argues that education, in whatever form it takes, should draw out a person’s strengths: “The power of appreciation is the measure of an individual’s aptitudes; and if a boy hates Greek and Latin and spends all his time whittling out steamboats, it is rather foolish to try to force him into the classics. There may be a locomotive in him, but there is certainly no foreshadowing evidence of either the teacher or preacher” (259). Industrial training, she argues, will in its stimulation of accumulated community wealth help ameliorate the most basic
questions pressing recently emancipated communities, “[W]hat shall we eat, what shall we drink, and wherewithal shall we be clothed” (261). She envisions a reciprocal relationship between trade work and higher education, suggesting that the classically trained intellectual, as teacher, preacher, orator, or other professional, is first and foremost a community leader whose success depends on the support of all: “One mind in a family or in a town may show a penchant for art, for literature, for the learned professions, or more bookish lore. You will know when it is there. No need to probe for it…. the whole community might well be glad to contribute its labor and money for the sustenance and cultivation of this brain” (263). Cooper’s framing of the African-American community as a practical support network for the talented intellectual is balanced by her insistence, like Cicero, Emerson, and Douglass before her, that this same individual must give back intellectual, moral, or spiritual sustenance to her community. Cooper’s original contribution to this strand of thinking is her valorization of the African American woman as suitable for such a role.

Preceding by a decade Du Bois’s insistence in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and “The Talented Tenth” (1903) on continued support for classical training of African American men so that they might take up the mantle of teachers with the best training possible (as he had and as Scarborough had, among thousands of others), Cooper’s advocacy for similar rigor in the training of black women as teachers is both prescient of the debates over black classical education ushered in following Booker T. Washington’s promotion of industrial training in his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Speech
and original in her identification of black women as a source of untapped potential in black classical education. In effect, Cooper’s arguments in *A Voice From the South*—as well as her own lifetime of contributions as a classically trained black teacher—position the “Black Woman of the South” as equally capable of classical scholarship and pedagogy as the black man. How she accomplishes this argument rhetorically is the subject of the following section. Cooper’s style of persuasion, especially her recurring use of metonymy, prosopopoeia, and anecdote, is an explicit point of comparison between her and Cicero, whose figural logic of inference and deduction, to the attuned ear, is manifest in *A Voice From the South*.

II. *In propria persona*: Anna Julia Cooper and the “Black Woman of the South”

As orator and author, Cooper accessed the authority associated with classical education and training, a realm dominated by white men, by skillfully manipulating the significations of her body using rhetorical methods. Nineteenth-century African American women who spoke on the lecture platform, or who, like Cooper, represented themselves as orators in print as well as in person, were under even more intense visual scrutiny than male orators like Douglass. Because public speaking was only gradually becoming more open to women over the course of the century, for black women such a public display of body and voice risked audience disapproval, or, even more dangerously, assumptions of bodily vulnerability or sexual availability stemming from stereotypes of black female promiscuity. Traveling lecturers like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner
Truth risked considerable harassment to make their voices heard. Harper, a well-known author and public speaker, wrote in an 1870 letter to fellow abolitionist William Still during a lecture tour in the South, “I don’t know but that you would laugh if you were to hear some of the remarks which my lectures call forth: ‘She is a man,’ again ‘She is not colored, she is painted’” (Foster 126-127). Unsettled by an African American woman’s appearance in public forums, audience members still reeling from the changes brought about by Emancipation looked to unlikely or comedic explanations for Harper’s “surprising” eloquence as though her speech might be part of a minstrel show. Truth (to whom we will turn in the next chapter as a counterpoint to Cooper’s classical rhetorical self-fashioning) was also at times accused of being a man because of her deep voice and confident presence.

Precisely because such accusations and catcalls were disproportionately directed at them, African American women whose oratorical work brought them into the public eye sometimes looked for ways to deflect attention away from their bodies, or to perform versions of bodily self-control signaled through, for example, modest clothing, temperance rhetoric, or other forms of perceptible moral restraint. Carolyn Sorisio explains that, for example, “temperance rhetoric provided African American authors with the necessary tools to reverse rhetorically the idea of the vulnerable, susceptible Negro body that needed to be controlled by excessive governmental and/or slaveholder restraint” (97). Performances of self-imposed control over the body deflected judgments of promiscuity or immoral (gender-bending) behavior. Contemporary critics have also honed in on “voice” as an important component of the
diverse strategies African American women orators employed to get their messages across. Carla Peterson suggests that Harper cultivated a “quiet” or subdued bodily performance, with the result that she was able to contest the stereotype of the “black female body perceived as sexualized or grotesque, and to promote the voice as pure melody, insubstantial sound, a negation of presence” (124). 19 Elizabeth Alexander, on the other hand, foregrounds aspects of voice that are intimately tied to corporeal presence: “Using the voice is a physical act, one that first announces the existence of the body of residence and then trumpets its arrival in a public space” (Alexander 345). The seeming contradiction here is the result of two main factors, the first being the differing rhetorical strategies employed by African American women orators in regard to performative self-fashioning, and the second being the jointly corporeal and incorporeal characteristics of voice as a phenomenon directly derived from the physical apparatus of the body, yet simultaneously perceivable as distinct from the body—a purely aural stimulus.

Alex W. Black has introduced the term “resonant body” for nineteenth-century African American women singers and performers to describe “the influences a performer’s voice had over the way a reviewer saw her body” and “how her voice resounds in descriptions of her body” (620). Black focuses on audiences’ descriptions of the African American opera singer Elizabeth Greenfield and the voice

19 In contrast to her reading of F. E. W. Harper’s bodily presence as subdued, which she presents as one end of the spectrum, Peterson observes that Sojourner Truth “call[ed] attention to the materiality of the black female body…to subvert the dominant culture’s construction of it” (22). We will turn to Truth’s rhetorical strategies in the next chapter.
actor Mary Webb, who performed in minstrel versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Of Greenfield, who was called the “Black Swan,” one audience member commented, “*she has two throats*—alluding to the perfect ease with which she passed from the highest to the lowest notes,” and noting in particular her embodied possession of a traditionally male register (Black 625). According to Black’s synesthetic paradigm, vocal performance becomes a “spectacle of the body”—and a potentially gender-bending one given the frequency of questions and accusations regarding the sex of African American women speaking or performing in public (629). For female orators in particular, it is likely these comments about “masculine” voice are rooted in, first, their ability to project loudly in order to be heard, and, second, their perceived appropriation of a male-dominated art. Of course, as classical rhetoricians and nineteenth-century elocutionists alike knew well, any voice needs training and practice to achieve oratorical volume and resonance—male voices were simply considered more likely to have received such training and excelled at it.

The relationship between voice and body, and the gendered qualities of each, is of particular relevance to Cooper’s rhetorical project in *A Voice From the South*, a printed text that encodes Cooper’s speaking voice as that of a black female orator. Just as it is for the Ciceronian orator, voice is an essential component of Cooper’s self-fashioning and of her bodily *conformatio*. Because of the bourgeois “respectability” and moral restraint Cooper was expected to perform as a middle-class schoolteacher and as a widower (she lost her husband after only two years of marriage), in her oratory and published essays she pursues a rhetorical balancing act
between shielding her body from potential discriminatory judgments and strategically bringing it back to the public eye at moments when her identity as a black woman is of utmost importance to her argument. In particular, Cooper uses the metonymic trope of “voice” to both intentionally deflect and re-direct attention to her body: her performance of her own voice in the text oscillates between masculine-identified classical rhetoric and feminine-identified vocal registers (i.e. “soprano”).

Black’s concept of the resonant body is a helpful premise for translating Cicero’s rhetorical principles to an African American performative context; he is indirectly influenced by classical rhetoric for the concept of the “resonant body” when he cites Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator* for a definition of “the whole art of pronunciation” as a synergy between “voice and gestures” (623). Pressing more closely on the classical roots of the “resonant body,” since this is the manner in which nineteenth-century American audience members would have interpreted formal lectures like those delivered by Anna Julia Cooper, yields an array of rhetorical strategies alternating between concealment and exposure of the body that Cooper used to manipulate audiences’ perceptions of herself as writer and orator. Such strategies—what I call “figural rhetoric”—implicitly capitalize on the Ciceronian correspondence between bodily and rhetorical *conformatio*. Cooper’s uses of

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20 As many critics have noted, Cooper experienced at least one very serious attack on her moral character when in 1906 she was dismissed from her post as principal at M Street High School over accusations of romantic involvement with John Love, a foster child (then a young man) whom she had taken in along with six other young charges (five of whom were adopted grandnieces and grandnephews) in the 1890s. The accusation was just a nominal reason for dismissal while her insistence on keeping Greek and Latin in the curriculum was the root cause (May 26-27; Lemert 10).
metonymy, prosopopoeia, and anecdote transform Ciceronian rhetoric as modeled in *de Oratore* into a tool for legitimizing her body to audiences who otherwise may have resisted her arguments on the basis of race and sex, and for arguing that the rights of citizenship—including access to education, political influence, and freedom of travel—be granted to African American women whose bodily *conformatio* otherwise precluded equal admittance. “Figural rhetoric” thus is a more specifically classical version of Black’s concept of the “resonant body” that draws out direct connections between Cicero’s privileging of the “ideal” masculine body as the most successful vehicle for rhetorical persuasion and Cooper’s use of Ciceronian figural strategies to reverse his deductive logic, reintroducing the black female body as equally capable of persuasion. “Figural,” of course, derives from the Latin *figura* (shape or figure) but as I am deploying it here I refer especially to the three valences of the related word *conformatio* (configuration) as it appears in *de Oratore*—as the confluence between the orator’s ideal physical appearance, his good moral character, and a successful rhetorical figure of speech. Cooper uses Ciceronian “figural rhetoric” to highlight her mastery of the classics as a vindication of the black woman’s ability to act as a representative of her race.

In *A Voice From the South*, Cooper’s first main argument in a prefatory section titled “Our Raison D’être” is that the “hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America” needs to be more accurately represented at the “bar” of public opinion (ii). In late-nineteenth-century controversies over African American education, labor, political representation, and North-South relations which she sums up as “our
American Controversy” and styles as a public trial, Cooper observes that “One important witness has not yet been heard from…. the Black Woman” (ii).\(^2\)

Framed in these terms, *A Voice From the South* steps up to bear witness. Perhaps inspired by musical training at Oberlin, her alma mater, or her weekly music salons with Reverend Francis Grimké and Charlotte Forten Grimké at her home in Washington, D.C., Cooper hones in on the figurative and emotive resonance of “voice” as a representation of the body and its experience that is able to shift between corporeal and rhetorical registers. Using the “voice” as a metonym for political representation, and as a rhetorical figure encircling her literal figure and shielding her body from judgment, Cooper frames *A Voice From the South* in choral and symphonic terms:

“One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman” (i). Her lamentation of the “mute and voiceless” nature of the black woman’s current contribution to representative advocacy on behalf of her race sets up the political necessity of her audible intervention.

\(^2\) Cooper’s notion of a race “trial” precedes W.E.B. Du Bois’s more famous diagnosis of a “race problem.” As May points out, “Although today W.E.B. Du Bois is usually remembered for posing the question, ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ at the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk* (3), Cooper had already raised the question of problematized existence and analyzed the notion of a ‘race problem’ over a decade earlier in *A Voice From the South*. Throughout her lifetime, Cooper objected vehemently to marginalized groups of people being ‘sized up and written down by others’ (*Voice* 225), characterized as a ‘mystery’ (iii), a ‘problem,’ or an ‘interesting case’ (‘On Education’ 252) to be studied and generalized about (*Voice* 186, 179), though ‘seldom consulted’ as knowers, experts, or even as human subjects (i)” (143-44).
Cooper’s speeches and essays metonymically figure the “voice” of the “Black Woman of the South” as a representation of a single body’s contribution to a harmonious “chorus,” an assembly understood here as the political or social forum. Her stated objective in deploying this contiguity between a chorus of voices and political expression draws upon the particularly oral nature of public politics and reform movements in nineteenth century America, a realm profligate with public speeches, conventions, expositions, literary societies, and musical performances. The extended metonym of “voice” serves a dual rhetorical purpose: first, to abstract the voice from the body when arguing for political inclusion, relying instead on verbal and harmonic conformatio; and second, to recall the bodily origin of the voice and to employ this contiguity to argue for acceptance of the Black female body, the source of her voice. Thus voice as Cooper deploys it is capable of taking on both racial and gendered qualities, even as it acts as a kind of neutral middle ground between body and speech. Just as “our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot quite put themselves in the dark man’s place,” she writes, “neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman” (iii).

When Cooper abstracts the Black woman’s “voice” from her body, drawing on the imaginative possibilities of the metonym, she capitalizes on the democratic idea of “harmony” to argue for the goal of equal political representation. Musical harmony celebrates difference while advocating for well-balanced representation of each contributing note. Cooper delicately extends these qualities to the realm of
racial politics. “Each race,” she claims, “has its badge, its exponent, its message, branded in its forehead by the great Master's hand which is its own peculiar keynote, and its contribution to the harmony of nations” (152). The language of harmony paired with the political language of equality paves the way for Cooper’s argument for the necessity and relevance of the Black woman’s voice to the “chorus” of the U.S. public sphere:

   It is because I believe the American people to be conscientiously committed to a fair trial and ungarbled evidence, and because I feel it essential to a perfect understanding and an equitable verdict that truth from each standpoint be presented at the bar—that this little Voice, has been added to the already full chorus (ii).

The Black woman’s voice, in this example, features as a “little voice,” a humble addition to the “full chorus.” Its meekness strategically strips away corporeal prominence, implying that the addition of Black women’s voices to public dialogues will not overturn the status quo, but rather draw out a previously unheard harmony.

   “Harmony” should also recall the pleasing “configurations” of words and bodily features that Cicero describes as belonging to the ideal Roman orator. Cooper’s extended metonymy of voice enables her to deemphasize audiences’ visual attention to her nonconforming black and female body while emphasizing the ideal democratic equality of her voice. Her deployment of masculine-identified classical rhetoric provides an externalized focal point for sensory apprehension of her person, an alternative figure: one of speech and not flesh. The black woman’s “voice” becomes a kind of secondary body envisioned in words. Cooper’s rhetorical strategy operates via a practical acceptance of the terms of Cicero’s body-speech-moral
character triad, but whereas Cicero emphasizes the promotion of the ideal body as the “figural” proof of rhetorical authority, Cooper presents figurative speech—here the metonym of voice—as the *conformatio* that really matters. A pleasing rhetorical figure, especially when read on the page so that audiences are dependent on the words for aesthetic judgments, can also be suggestive of a pleasing or harmonious voice and body. In this, Cooper appeals to the *ars memoriae* (art of memory) of classical rhetorical theory, or the theory that active processing in visual terms is one of the most effective accompaniments to memory, argument, and aural reception.  

Audiences’ or readers’ visual “processing” need not be of the body of the orator, but rather, as Cicero notes, of “things not seen,” such as a figure of speech: “ideas which we are scarcely able to grasp by thinking we hold fast as if by looking” (2.357). So when an orator deploys the imaginative resonance of a trope, she commands the visual attention of the audience using only words.

Cooper’s reliance on the metonym of the harmonious voice as an ideal rhetorical figure for the “Black Woman of the South” in her prefatory statement carries her through the most dangerous part of her argument—her explanation of her reason for presuming to speak at all. When she returns to the specifically embodied qualities of the black woman’s voice, she does not present this voice as “little.” Instead, it carries with it specifically gendered and unique musical attributes that inherently justify its inclusion. Beyond “harmony” and equality, Cooper identifies

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22 The unattributed *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (circa 90s BCE), which was previously thought to be written by Cicero, is the earliest and best Roman source text on the *ars memoriae*, based on lost Greek sources.
the female voice as an essential component of a full chorus. The first part of *A Voice From the South* consists of four essays focusing on the status and education of women, and particularly Black women, in the U.S. The title of this section, “Soprano Obligato,” elevates a typical female voice range above the other vocal parts. A musical passage marked *obligato* by a composer indicates the necessity of retaining the passage, with exact notes and instrumentals, in order to preserve the integrity of the work. Cooper’s pairing of the word *obligato* to the soprano vocal part points both to the reader’s obligation not to skip over this section and, more importantly, to the absolute necessity of the voice and political perspective of women in the U.S. civic arena.

By taking command of the metonym of voice and other rhetorical tropes such as prosopopoeia, anecdote, and metaphor, Cooper presents bodies—both those of others and her own—in the order and the manner that best suits her needs. She uses “figural rhetoric” to strategically distance the audience from their preconceptions about the actual bodies under consideration and to reintroduce these bodies in terms of their unique attributes to an increasingly sympathetic audience. Cooper’s balancing act between her desire for her audience to ignore the body and her desire for them to pay attention to the body hinges on her recognition of the fact that it is the (violently) constructed nature of categories like race and gender that makes preconceptions about bodies both culturally powerful and meaningless. If her audience did not already have preconceived notions about the correspondence
between body, intellect, and moral character, she would not have to obscure her body in order to effectively argue against its discrimination.

Cooper’s introduction of specific bodies into her speeches and essays most often takes the rhetorical form of the anecdote or of prosopopoeia. Her use of these strategies reasserts her control over what kinds of bodies her audience is imagining, while still deflecting the gaze from herself except for the few powerful moments where she explicitly directs it there. Throughout *A Voice From the South*, she uses anecdote to discuss gritty details of racial and sexual discrimination. A notable example is her retelling of an anecdote about Annie E. Anderson Walker, an African American artist “who had shown marked ability in drawing and coloring,” and whose application to the Corcoran school was accepted on paper, but rejected as soon as she “presented her ticket of admission *in propria persona*,” or in her own person (113-114).

The school had praised her work highly initially, but “had not dreamed a colored person could do such work” and would not admit Walker, a black woman, now that she had shown up at the door (114). In this example, Cooper’s own race and gender plays no explicit role—the framing of the anecdote protects her as author from the visual scrutiny of her readers. Nevertheless, the example serves as a jarring reminder of the real barriers facing women like Cooper, who is attempting a similar

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23 Elizabeth Alexander mistakenly identifies the unnamed “colored woman” Cooper refers to in this passage as Edmonia Lewis, an African American sculptor (347), but the timing is incongruent—Lewis was already studying in Rome by the late 1860s and reached the peak of her career in the 1870s, and Cooper was writing in 1892. However, Lisa E. Farrington and other African American art historians have documented an incident that happened to Annie E. Anderson Walker that, based on Corcoran school records and a letter written by Frederick Douglass urging the school the reverse the decision, is identical to that Cooper describes (52).
experiment in her publication of *A Voice From the South*, a text that she hopes will be judged for its merit, but that cannot on principle be separated from its special focus on black womanhood. Because Cooper does not, in fact, want to “whitewash” her text since to do so would be utterly beside the point, the “Black Woman of the South” who is named as the author on the title page, and as the speaking “voice” presenting itself at the bar of public opinion, emerges frequently as though *in propria persona* through anecdote and prosopopoeia.

Just as Cicero speaks through the persona of Crassus throughout much of *de Oratore*, utilizing the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia to turn the respected orator into his mouthpiece, Cooper uses the persona of the “Black Woman of the South”—and her “soprano obligato”—as her figural mouthpiece. This “Black Woman” reports experiences that Cooper herself may or may not have undergone personally. Often, Cooper speaks of this “Black Woman” using a mixture of first and third person, carefully attuned to just when a personal anecdote will serve her argument best, and when a rhetorical abstraction speaks more powerfully than an individual voice could. For example, as Elizabeth Alexander points out, in the most frequently quoted line from *A Voice From the South* about the Black woman’s role in the advancement of her race, Cooper actually quotes herself, but obscures the intimate origin of the quote. She writes, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or
special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’’” (31).24

Abstracting her own voice into that of the capitalized “BLACK WOMAN,” Cooper uses prosopopoeia to invoke the presence of the representative Black woman. Cooper’s decision to detach the sentiment from her individual person lends the authority of representative anonymity to her argument, for the moment subsuming her own body and experience beneath the imagined collectivity of the trope.

Her prosopopoeic strategy here has the effect of inserting her most important overall argument in A Voice From the South—the black woman’s role in racial uplift—into rhetorical terms already extant in debates about racial uplift, highlighting an urgency that may have been obscured without using the pseudonymous “Black Woman” as her mouthpiece. These terms had been set up, in particular, by the abolitionist and black nationalist Martin Delany, whose sentiments about racial representation Cooper references immediately before revising them with her “when and where I enter” quote:

The late Martin R. Delany, who was an unadulterated black man, used to say when honors of state fell upon him, that when he entered the council of kings the black race entered with him; meaning, I suppose, that there was no discounting his race identity and attributing his achievements to some admixture of Saxon blood. But our present record of eminent men, when placed beside the actual status of the race in America to-day, proves that no man can represent the race. Whatever the attainments of the individual may be, unless his home has moved on pari passu, he can never be regarded as identical

24 As Alexander observes, “By putting the words in quotation marks she valorizes and sets off the import of the words just as she does when she sets off a passage from Milton…. it is as though she knows her own author-ity is under siege before she writes a single word, so she elides her first-person perspective into a clue-laded, newly created hybrid or collage of third and first-person. She sits simultaneously in both narrative positions at once, inhabiting them as need be to most persuasively state her case” (352).
with or representative of the whole. (30)

Cooper revises Delany’s inference that the “unadulterated” black man is the best representative of the race by asserting authoritatively that it is the “BLACK WOMAN,” the heart of the home and domestic sphere (which must be uplifted pari passu, or on equal footing with exemplary individuals), who is the more accurate measuring stick of racial progress. In this, Cooper adds her voice to that of the Reverend Alexander Crummell, who had recently published a pamphlet titled “The black woman of the South: her neglects and her needs,” from which Cooper likely borrowed her figure of the “Black Woman of the South.” Crummell, after lamenting the general neglect of black women in the rhetoric of racial uplift, called for the organization of missionary “sisterhoods” to be sent to the South “to sit down with ‘Aunt Chloe’ and her daughters; to show and teach them the ways and habits of thrift, economy, neatness, and order” and to organize “sewing schools” and other practical forms of industrial training (10). In turn, Crummell’s choice of the figure of Aunt Chloe recalls Frances E. W. Harper’s poems in Sketches of Southern Life (1872), which first introduced the allegorical character as the politically savvy anchor of her post-Emancipation black community. Cooper’s prioritization of the “BLACK WOMAN” in racial uplift, and her use of her as a figurative mouthpiece,

25 Kevin Gaines points out Cooper’s allusion to Alexander Crummell’s pamphlet (134).
26 See, for example, Harper’s poem “The Deliverance,” reprinted in Frances Smith Foster’s A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader (1990), in which Aunt Chloe shames black men like “Jonas Handy” who “sold his vote / For just three sticks of candy” and pushes her community to value education and political representation. The former slave, who learns to read at age sixty as soon as the Civil War is over, is an exemplary figure for racial uplift (“Learning to Read”).
therefore, revises the terms already set forth by Harper, Delany, and Crummell: first, by reprioritizing women; and second, by using Crummell’s abstracted phrase, “The black woman of the South,” as a rhetorical figure capable of appearing in propria persona in her text, a figure embodying uplift who can be either a classically trained intellectual such as herself or a humble “Aunt Chloe.”

The “Black Woman of the South,” as a prosopopoeic figure, often overlaps with Cooper’s own personal anecdotes in a way that especially underscores the injustices of racism and sexism from the perspective of the highly educated African American woman writer and teacher. In her essay “Woman Versus the Indian” (which critiques Anna Shaw’s implication in an 1891 speech at the National Woman’s Council meeting that the “woman question” takes precedence over the “race question”), Cooper uses prosopopoeia to protest the discriminations and dangers faced by black women traveling alone south of the Mason-Dixon line. She introduces her own experiences in a veiled manner by transitioning from a discussion of the “Black Woman” in general terms to a personal anecdote about traveling in a segregated train car in which she emerges gradually from repeated rhetorical deferral into an embodied first person account. The general discussion of the Black woman begins by using the third person as a distancing technique in which Cooper’s literal and rhetorical figures are kept intentionally separate:

The Black Woman of the South has to do considerable travelling in this country, often unattended. She thinks she is quiet and unobtrusive in her manner, simple and inconspicuous in her dress, and can see no reason why in any chance assemblage of ladies, or even a promiscuous gathering of ordinarily well-bred and dignified individuals, she should be signaled out for any marked consideration (89-90).
Here third person prevents direct association between the travelling “Black Woman of the South” and Cooper. But her subsequent switch to first person, first using conditionals, and then using the indicative, signals the entry of Cooper’s corporeal body into her textual representation.

Cooper’s transition to personal anecdote at first maintains her rhetorical distancing techniques, using conditionals to merely “suppose” an association that she later asserts in fact:

If, therefore, I found myself in that compartment of a train designated by the sovereign law of the state for presumable Caucasians, and for colored persons only when traveling in the capacity of nurses and maids, should a conductor inform me, as a gentleman might, that I had made a mistake and offer to show me the proper car for black ladies; I might wonder at the expensive arrangements of the company and the state in providing special and separate accommodations for the transportation of various hues of humanity. (94)

The deflective effects of words like “if,” “should,” and “might” places Cooper-the-author in this train car only in hypothetical terms. The effects of this strategy continue even when the conditionals drop off and Cooper’s own literal body replaces that of the heretofore generalized, representative “Black Woman of the South”:

But when a great burly six feet of masculinity with sloping shoulders and unkempt beard swaggers in, and, throwing a roll of tobacco into one corner of his jaw, growls out at me over the paper I am reading, “Here gurl,” (I am past thirty) “you better git out ‘n dis car ’f yer don’t, I’ll put yer out,”—my mental annotation is Here’s an American citizen who has been badly trained. He is sadly lacking in both ‘sweetness’ and ‘light.’ (95)

Cooper’s unveiled use of the first person and the indicative in this transitional moment and the unfolding of this personal anecdote about train travel is accompanied by an even more graphic description of the distasteful bodily characteristics of the
unwashed, tobacco-chewing man who kicks her out of the segregated car. Her emphasis on the negative aspects of his bodily demeanor sets up potential criticism against her own body and its location in a “whites-only” train car as a pointless exercise: it is, she suggests, bodily carriage rather than race or gender that distinguishes proper bodies from improper bodies. Specifically, she highlights the man’s voice and accent as indicators of his “bad training” and lack of moral integrity, turning the reader’s attention to his body rather than hers. Whereas Cooper has carefully cultivated her rhetorical voice as representative of her intellect, his “growl” distances him from the urbanity expected of any ideal representative of country, sex, or race—he is “badly trained.”

Cooper’s use of personal anecdote in this example, or in other words, her reinsertion of her own body over that of the abstracted figure, the “Black Woman of the South,” and her accompanying supply of vivid detail, is an enactment of the concept of *in propria persona* (in one’s own person) that she invokes elsewhere to describe the artist Annie E. Anderson Walker’s appearance at the art school to which she was admitted on merit, but rejected at the door. For the black woman of Cooper’s time, appearing *in propria persona* at the gates of high culture was to risk dismissal. But for Cooper’s rhetorical project, the reenactment of such moments of dismissal as anecdotes embedded in her polished prose was the key to unraveling racist and sexist discourses that would privilege external appearance over ability, training, and character. Arguing within a broader context of the relationship between
historiography and literary form, Joel Fineman asserts that the anecdote opens a space for reality to break through into a text:

The anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports. (72)

In these terms, when Cooper includes the anecdote of traveling in a train car through the Jim Crow South, the detailed account of this embodied experience brings the reader into the car with her, hearing the conductor’s “growl” and smelling the tobacco on his breath when he threatens to pull her out. The event that happened to Cooper has happened—and will continue to happen—to the “Black Woman of the South” time and time again, and has now, in a small way, happened to the reader who might not otherwise be at all cognizant of the representativeness of the moment for black women. Cooper’s strategic interchanges between first and third person, the personal and the abstract, are reminiscent (in concept, if not mechanics) of the rhetorical parameters of the slave narrative genre, in which the narrative must repeatedly establish its own autobiographical authenticity (like Cooper riding the train *in propria persona*) even as its goal is to be representative of a much wider swath of human experience.

Elizabeth Alexander’s reading of the embodied nature of this particular anecdote highlights Cooper’s intentional representation of herself, now an educated woman living in D.C., as a known version of the otherwise too abstract or
misunderstood “Black Woman of the South.” Citing a moment when Cooper represents herself as writing down a note for future reference, Alexander argues that in this exemplary act of writing Cooper “writes a space for herself and her type: the working African-American woman writing and traveling through the South with neither husband nor father, nor other companionship—simply herself and her intellect. It puts the body in that space, writing” (354). The moment in question follows immediately after Cooper tells of the “unkempt” conductor who threatens to throw her out of the train car:

and when in the same section of our enlightened and progressive country, I see from the car window, working on private estates, convicts from the state penitentiary, among them squads of boys from fourteen to eighteen years of age in a chain-gang, their feet chained together and heavy blocks attached—not in 1850, but in 1890, ’91, and ’92, I make a note on the flyleaf of my memorandum, The women in this section should organize a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Human Beings, and disseminate civilizing tracts, and send throughout the region apostles to anti-barbarism for the propagation of humane and enlightened ideas. (95-96)

Cooper’s tone here is loaded with irony when she calls America an “enlightened and progressive country,” juxtaposed with the specter of modern-day slavery as embodied in the chain gang. She reverses the rhetoric of missionary societies intent on “civilizing” Africa or black populations in the American South by suggesting that “civilizing tracts” should be handed out to the white men of the region to prevent “cruelty” and “barbarism” and introduce them to “humane and enlightened ideas.” Indeed, it is not just the fact that she represents herself as writing that is significant, but that the black woman writer takes on the cultural responsibility of education and
moral uplift that in previous decades was generally understood as the sphere of white women—including the moral uplift of white men.

In these moments of Cooper’s performative embodiment of urbanity and acumen, which are highlighted by comparison to the unruly body of the “badly trained” conductor and the moral degeneration of white men, she shows that it is not race or sex that determine leadership qualities or the ability to perform the modern-day social function of a Roman orator, but rather education, training, and natural talent. All of these latter qualities are, of course, the core of Cicero’s program for the successful Roman orator: *ars* and *ingenium*. What is different is that Cooper especially emphasizes education and training while at the same time she decouples natural talent (*ingenium*) from bodily privilege—what in nineteenth-century America amounted to maleness and whiteness, and what for Cicero had amounted to maleness and Roman citizenship. Cooper’s theoretical orientation toward the body acknowledges externally and historically imposed bodily differences, but does not take these differences as automatic signifiers of “racial” or “gendered” differences. So in her speaking and writing, the black body that has not “exceeded” according to cultural standards emerges most strongly in its injured or mistreated state, a wounded product of the cultural violence of slavery and the deleterious psychological effects of racial discrimination. For example, lamenting centuries of overwork and brutal physical labor, she describes black Southerners as “heirs of crippled, deformed, frost-bitten, horny-handed and empty handed mothers and fathers. Oh, the shame of it!” (193). Cooper’s vocabulary for the repercussions of slavery conveys connotations of
physical deformity or disability that are not at all related to skin color or natural features, but rather to violence of forced labor: “these poor wretches stood every man to his post for two hundred and fifty years, digging trenches, building roads, tunneling mountains, clearing away forests, cultivating the soil in the cotton fields and rice swamps till fingers dropped off, toes were frozen, knees twisted, arms stiff and useless” (193). The short catalogue of altered body parts appears here as a tragic result of combined mental and physical violence to African American bodies in the course of U.S. history.

Cooper’s account of the bodily effects of slave labor, and the lingering psychological and material effects of racist violence, on African Americans emerges as a dark shadow of the training of Cicero’s ideal orator to bodily perfection, and of the educational opportunities handed out to white men during her lifetime. In a metaphor comparing African Americans to “timber” from the African continent, Cooper suggests that any perceived degradation of the material is a result of bad handling, not the quality of the original: “Certainly the original timber as it came from the African forests was good enough…. And if anything further is needed to account for racial irregularities—the warping and shrinking, the knotting and cracking of the sturdy old timber, the two hundred and fifty years of training here are quite sufficient to explain it all” (239). The “training” that Cooper ironically refers to here is the violent psychological and bodily degradations of slavery. Her choice of wording calls to mind a brand of apologist rhetoric that framed slavery as an institution that helped “civilize” Africans and their descendants “materially,
intellectually, morally, and religiously”—what Booker T. Washington later called “the school of American slavery” (577). Cooper’s critique of this kind of rhetoric explicitly valorizes black bodily and moral integrity, exposing the history of violent constructions of racial stereotypes through the institution they were deployed to legitimize.

Her choice of metaphorical referent, timber from African forests, also connotes another kind of association with this history of slave violence: that of the vehicle of forced slave transportation, the slave ship. Comparing the journey of African American bodies to the journey of the “timber” that repaired slave ships brings the violence of forced transplantation into an even sharper focus. It also echoes Douglass’s sentiments in “Self-Made Men” when he describes the soul, or “principles of honor, integrity and affection,” as a kind of “timber” essential to good ship-building: “Her model may be faultless; her spars may be the finest and her canvas the whitest,” but if her timber is “rotten,” he says, “she will go down in the first storm” (561). Douglass here calls attention to the artificiality of aesthetics (for example, skin color) as opposed to core integrity, while Cooper adds another layer of

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27 The full passage in Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) reads as follows: “Then, when we rid ourselves of prejudice, or racial feeling, and look facts in the face, we must acknowledge that, notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe. This is so to such an extent that Negroes in this country, who themselves or whose forefathers went through the school of slavery, are constantly returning to Africa as missionaries to enlighten those who remained in the fatherland” (577).
complexity, showing how bad “training” can be equally as destructive to the body and mind as good training is beneficial.

Cicero’s reflections on the training of the ideal Roman orator—especially his tautological descriptions of the *vir bonus* whose positive self-fashioning relies on his bodily *conformatio*—emerge, then, as an early version of the self-perpetuating racist discourses deployed to keep African Americans out of higher education, out of the classics, and off of the lecture platform. Though ancient Rome did not have the same designations of “race” we are familiar with today, there were citizens and non-citizens, ideal bodies and non-ideal bodies. As Joy Connolly notes, “In Cicero's attacks on bad Latin, cloudy thinking, garrulity, rustic phrases, and obscenity, echoes of his contempt for the talk of immigrants, women, slaves, and the ill-educated are plainly heard” (147). Anna Julia Cooper’s interventions into the legacy of Roman oratory in nineteenth-century America take the form of figures of speech borrowed or adapted from Cicero that reintroduce the body of the “Black Woman of the South”—and her “soprano obligato”—as a powerful source of rhetorical persuasion. In her “figural rhetoric” of prosopopoeia, metonymy, and anecdote, Cooper accomplishes jointly, both *in propria persona* and in classical rhetorical terms, what she could not have by pursuing either strategy alone. By transforming Cicero’s equation between bodily and rhetorical *conformatio*—a critique from within classical discourse—Cooper revises prevailing assumptions about who has the right to speak in late nineteenth-century America. The next two chapters look both backwards and forwards from Cooper’s 1892 *A Voice From the South*, turning from the subject of
classical education and rhetoric proper to a consideration of how the legacy of the classics in nineteenth-century American visual arts and popular culture affected the rhetorical strategies of black women orators and writers.
CHAPTER THREE

The “Libyan Sibyl”: Sojourner Truth, Race, and the Neoclassical Body

You know, children, I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations. —Sojourner Truth¹

Sojourner Truth, the African American itinerant preacher, orator, and antislavery and women’s rights advocate spoke in front of hundreds of audiences across the Northeast and Midwest during a career of advocacy work spanning from the late 1840s to early 1880s. Truth’s relationship to the U.S. “culture of classicism” can be traced in her own and others’ visual and rhetorical alignments of her body with ideal female bodies celebrated in mid-nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture and printed iconography, particularly the “Libyan Sibyl” and the allegorical figure of Columbia.² Famous for her powerful voice and originality of expression in public speaking, Truth’s long-lasting cultural legacy consistently features her oratorical success side-by-side with her illiteracy, figuring her orally delivered speeches as a mode of “natural” expression wholly separate from printed media. Truth’s rhetorical skill is too often memorialized as characteristic only of a history of African American oral expression, at the expense of a fuller consideration of nineteenth-century U.S. oratory as it relates to a burgeoning print culture. In an era of expanding print

¹ Quoted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in an 1867 letter to the New York World (qtd. in Painter 230).
technologies, Americans often read about oratorical performances via printed materials such as reviews, advertisements, and elocutionary manuals. This chapter shows how Truth’s verbal and performative figurations of her body in oratorical contexts were in direct conversation with existing strategies and technologies for representing visual impressions in printed newspapers and magazines. This cross-media exchange was facilitated by Truth’s habit of having the newspaper read aloud to her, and it brings to light a rich archive of encoded neoclassical aesthetics in her own self-representations.

There has been considerable recent scholarship on Truth’s active cultivation of her public image via portrait photographs that she sat for in the 1860s and 1870s. Extending this line of inquiry to address the interplay between print and oratorical contexts, my focus is on the visual impressions nineteenth-century readers would have had of Truth as a result of media coverage, and the visual associations audiences at her speeches would have made when Truth used rhetorical strategies likening her body to neoclassical sculptural and print iconography. Analysis of oral and written figurations of Truth’s body is an important complement to scholarship on her photographs because many nineteenth-century readers would not have had access to these portraits. In an era before printed photographic reproduction, visual representation in the press remained limited to engravings and a stock set of

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typographic illustrations, and so Truth’s image as represented in the press must be theorized alongside these visual technologies. In the absence of photographs, a phrase that repeatedly accompanied Truth’s appearances in the press—“the Libyan Sibyl”—instead conveyed a verbal portrait inspired by the flourishing of American neoclassical sculpture. The nickname originates from an 1863 Atlantic Monthly article in which Harriet Beecher Stowe names Truth as the inspiration for a well-known white marble sculpture called The Libyan Sibyl, which was completed by William Wetmore Story in 1861 [Figure 3.1]. For readers of Stowe’s article, Truth’s body becomes entwined with the sculpture and its cultural representations.

Story’s sculpture depicted the brooding figure of a woman understood to be one of the ten famous prophetic female sibyls of antiquity. Hailing from different regions and catalogued by Varro in the first century B.C.E., the most famous of these figures is the Cumaean Sibyl, memorialized by Vergil in his Aeneid and “Fourth Eclogue.” Nineteenth-century Americans would have understood Story’s Libyan Sibyl in this classical context, envisioning the sculpture as a representation of prophetic power and access to the divine. They would also have related Story’s achievement to Michelangelo’s depiction of the sibyls and prophets of antiquity on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: an American expatriate in Rome, Story was directly inspired by Michelangelo’s work, and his Libyan Sibyl joined an array of American neoclassical sculptural pieces inspired by antiquity at mid-century. Stowe’s decision to compare Sojourner Truth to Story’s well-known sculpture suggested a metaphorical kinship between Truth as an antislavery advocate “predicting”
Emancipation and nineteenth-century popular conceptions of the prophetic iconicity of sibyls of antiquity.

The idea of Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl”—sculpture and prophetess—proved irresistible to other journalists, who borrowed the descriptor (and other permutations including “the African sibyl,” the “sable sibyl,” and “the colored American Sibyl”) both directly and in portrayals of Truth’s physical characteristics, posture, and gestures. For example, as biographer Nell Irvin Painter points out, Frances Dana Gage’s subsequent 1863 account of Truth at the Woman’s Rights Convention at Akron, Ohio in 1851 has Truth sitting in the exact posture of Story’s Libyan Sibyl, with “her elbow on her knee, and her chin resting on her broad, hard palm” (Gage qtd. in Painter 170). Circulated and reprinted across multiple papers over the
decades, the comparison of Truth with Story’s sculpture provided an enduring verbal portrait that operated via visual comparison to a notable icon. Critical analysis of this comparison has so far been limited to discussion of Story’s artistic agenda and the relationships between Stowe and Truth on the one hand, and Story and Stowe on the other. What has been left out is 1) a broader cultural analysis of the significance of nineteenth-century references in print to Truth as both a neoclassical work of art and a classical prophetess, 2) a consideration of the ways in which these references interact with visual paradigms of race, and 3) an analysis of Truth’s calculated response to this shaping of her image as it is informed by nineteenth-century U.S. neoclassical aesthetics and print culture.

This chapter seeks to fill these gaps by investigating in detail Stowe’s sculptural paradigm as a precedent for visual neoclassical comparison. Stowe’s extended verbal comparison of Truth to the figure of Story’s Libyan Sibyl is a form of ekphrasis. While ekphrasis in its most narrow modern definition refers to a verbal, especially poetic, description of a work of art, in this example Stowe describes Truth as though her body itself were the sculpture. The trope of ekphrasis is useful for teasing out Stowe’s elision between Truth’s body and Story’s sculpture, and it applies especially through comparison to ancient Roman forensic oratory, in which an ekphrastic description could inspire auditors to visualize any scene, object, person, or event as if they themselves were eyewitnesses. In ancient Rome, ekphrasis as a
rhetorical strategy was not limited to artwork.\textsuperscript{4} Stowe’s rhetorical strategy provided a visual paradigm of ideal embodiment that sidestepped stereotypically hyper-sexualized or caricatured depictions of black women’s bodies in the press. However, it also replicated the same modes of racialized objectification by reducing Truth’s body to a visual “type” with limited significations: the neoclassical sculpture.

Recent critical commentators on the figure of ekphrasis explore ways in which the often-female, often-racialized “others” of ekphrastic description have traditionally been rendered as objects (of eroticism or violence, in particular) rather than as subjects, a power dynamic as familiar to readers encountering John Keats’s “still unravish’d bride of quietness” as to historians of nineteenth-century visual culture, rife with derogatory depictions of black bodies.\textsuperscript{5} “But,” W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, “suppose the ‘visual other’ was not merely represented by or ‘made to speak’ by the speaking subject? Suppose that the ‘other’ spoke for herself, told her own story, attempting an ‘ekphrasis of the self’?” (184). Mitchell, Michael A. Chaney, and Sarah Blackwood propose the possibility of just such an “ekphrastic self-portrait” proffered by the black female subject—rendered, for example, in the genre of the

\textsuperscript{4} For an analysis of ekphrasis in ancient Greek and Roman oratory, see Ruth Webb’s \textit{Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice} (2009). “When integrated into a full-scale speech,” Webb explains, “ekphrasis served to involve the listener imaginatively and emotionally in the events at issue, making them share the speaker’s indignation at a crime or, in the more complex examples, altering their perception of a fact by placing them in the situation of an eyewitness and making them share that viewer's experience” (193). The second section of this chapter explores Webb’s definition in more detail.

\textsuperscript{5} See John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), and numerous critics’ invocation of this ode as the “proof-text of ekphrastic poetry” (Hadas 108), and “[t]he most famous instance of ekphrastic ambivalence toward the female image” (Mitchell 170).
self-authored slave narrative that contests racial and sexual stereotypes (Blackwood 107). Moving beyond written texts to consider oratorical performances as sites for ekphrasis, the following analysis shows how Truth appropriated Stowe’s description of her as the “Libyan Sibyl”—which was deployed in print as both caption and sobriquet—through moments of performative re-narration of her own body and bodily significations.

In particular, through her rhetoric and in her performances, Truth transformed the sibyl icon into a cultivated association with Columbia, the neoclassical goddess who personified the American nation in nineteenth-century printed cartoons and patriotic iconography. Ultimately, Truth’s strategy was designed to bolster her public authority and position her as a citizen and leader of the nation via what I call “national embodiment”—for example, the incorporation of emblems such as the stars and stripes in her clothing, or her claim to be as old as the American century, born in 1776. Whereas in Stowe’s article, the ancient geographical modifier “Libyan” is deployed as a racialized symbol for black Africa, exoticizing this American-born speaker and projecting nineteenth-century racial tensions backwards onto antiquity,

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6 For Mitchell, the slave narrative operates visually especially because “[e]arly reviewers of slave narratives regularly compare them to ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ which provide ‘transparent access’ to slavery and are to be praised in proportion to the sense of ‘ocular conviction’ they provide” (185). In Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative (2008), Chaney argues that “in the liminal gap between the visual and the verbal forms deployed by ex-fugitive authors and artists lay self-representational possibilities for overcoming cultural stereotypes, reductions, and essentialist collapses” (9). Similarly, Blackwood reads Harriet Jacobs’s revision of her own runaway slave notice in her Incidents in the Life of as Slave Girl (1861) as an “ekphrastic self-portrait,” an idea which will be examined in further detail later in this chapter (107).
Truth deploys the iconography of the “classical” goddess Columbia and adaptations of the sibyl trope in ways that indubitably signal her American citizenship, re-narrating the relationship between race and neoclassical aesthetics. Truth’s engagement with neoclassical visual paradigms shows how her oratory is in direct dialogue with the printed materials that featured them, including not only Stowe’s article, but also reviews of sculptural exhibitions, newspaper engravings and typographical illustrations, and political cartoons. Truth wanted to replace the exoticizing modifier “Libyan” with proof of her American-ness, and she drew on the iconography of Columbia in order to do it.

Critics grapple with the mediated nature of written documents relating to Sojourner Truth: because she depended on others to read and write on her behalf, the “real” historical Truth seems always just out of reach, a person whose actions and movements can be traced but whose exact words were immeasurably altered in the proliferation of caricatured and stylized accounts of her speech. In the wake of scholarship by Carleton Mabee and Nell Irvin Painter who destabilize the accuracy of written transcriptions of Truth’s oratory, especially Gage’s account of Truth at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention, critics have paid increasing attention to records of her actions, rather than her words. Christina Accomando and Jeannine Marie DeLombard focus on Truth’s skillful use of legal measures to protect her rights, including recovering her son from illegal sale from New York to Alabama in 1827-28, vindicating her name against libel after the scandal surrounding the collapse of the “Kingdom of Matthias” in 1835, and pressing charges after an assault by a streetcar
conductor in Washington, D.C. in 1865. Following the work of Painter and Kathleen Collins, Augusta Rohrbach argues that Truth’s procurement of copyrights for new editions of her 1875 and 1878 editions of her *Narrative and “Book of Life”* and for a number of *cartes-de-visite* portrait photographs “should be seen as Truth's active response to the solidification of her image happening all around her” (89). The suggestion is that Truth’s copyrighting of these materials, combined with editorial choices regarding what to reprint from her *“Book of Life,”* constitutes Truth’s only traceable interventions in the proliferation of written materials circulating about her in newspapers and magazines during her lifetime. These shifted priorities in scholarship on Truth advance a portrait of a historical woman whose actions speak even more loudly than her words, both because of their verified authenticity in the archive and because they seem to cut through the conflicting verbiage surrounding her person.

But Truth’s “words” are, and have always been, an intrinsic and powerful source of her popular appeal. Again and again, nineteenth-century newspaper correspondents, letter-writers, and biographers writing on Truth’s behalf convey the idea that, when it comes to Truth’s oratory, “It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gesture, and listened to her strong and truthful tones” (*Narrative* 117, citing Robinson in *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, 1851). The frequently noted “untranslatability” of Truth’s speeches

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into print is not merely a marker of oratorical success: it also signals an embedded cultural ambivalence about the person delivering the speech, an illiterate black woman. Every account of Truth’s oratory includes some mention of her physical characteristics, lingering often on the color of her skin, her height, or her resonant voice. In paired descriptions of her body and her oratory, the implied subtext is “you have to see it to believe it.” Because Truth’s words, voice, and physical presence constitute such an important part of her iconicity—both in the nineteenth century and today—they require careful attention.

It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of equating Truth’s illiteracy with an orality romanticized as wholly separate from print culture—to do so trades on the sensationalizing ambivalence of nineteenth-century reports in which “untranslatability” is a rhetorical trope that perpetuates a dichotomy between the oral and the written. Writing has a long history of differentiating itself from speech through such tropes. Because of the material durability of the archive, we have tended to overtheorize print’s negotiation of orality at the expense of considering how oratory negotiates print. In the context of African American literature, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that the “figure of the Talking Book that fails to speak” to the illiterate black subject is a model for representing orality in literature, “the paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral within the written, precisely when oral black culture was transforming itself into a written culture” (131-132). Gates cites the following excerpt from A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself as “the black tradition’s first use of the trope of the Talking
that the emergence of the “Talking Book” as an intertextual trope in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives shows the authors encoding the oral in the written, framed here as a teleological progression.

Recent scholarship in African American book history and visual culture has complicated Gates’s trajectory by suggesting a rich array of as-yet-largely unexplored intersections between African American oral and print culture. As Leon Jackson argues, Gates’s model of “Signifyin(g)” rooted in the intertextual trope of the talking book pays little attention to print culture itself and is limited by Gates’s unexamined privileging of “orality over the written or printed text…its chief appeal being its putatively African origins” (256). Gates champions tropes of orality in written texts because they seem to preserve a tradition of “oral black culture” that he contrasts to the behemoth “literate white text” in nineteenth-century print culture (Gates 131). But we can revise Gates’s central point to say that print culture influenced and became encoded in oral expression in this period just as much as orality became encoded in written tropes such as the talking book. This process is exemplified in Truth’s ekphrastic depictions of herself as responses to print culture’s iconographic images of the neoclassical sculpture, the supplicant slave mother, and Columbia.

*Book*: “[My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship’s crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black” (qtd. in Gates 136).
Truth, though illiterate, was in direct conversation with printed texts and their effects on the public. Her illiteracy is not coextensive with a wholly separate “oral black culture.”

This chapter begins by investigating the cultural history of the sibyl motif in nineteenth-century America via the medium of neoclassical sculpture and its relationship to the fabrication of racial categories in the aftermath of trans-Atlantic slavery, especially as mediated by print conventions. The second section shows how Truth adapted and shaped the connotations of the “Libyan Sibyl” descriptor in oral performance with first-hand knowledge of popular American classicism and print paradigms, particularly by suggesting a visual and symbolic association between herself and the celebrated figure of Columbia.

I. The Sibyl and the Sculptural Paradigm

Until the 1880s, commercially successful technologies for reproducing photographs in newspapers—such as the halftone relief process—had not yet been developed, and such reproduction would not become common practice until the 1890s. Engravings were the primary mode of newspaper illustration, and these were time-consuming and costly to produce on an individual basis. Truth’s photographic image was available as early as 1863 or 1864, soon after both Stowe and Gage’s articles were published. Truth posed for portraits and sold her image as individual cartes de visite and cabinet cards in person to audiences and through the mail, but these portraits and cards did not contribute to the popular image of her cultivated in
newspapers and magazines because the technology for reproducing them did not yet exist. I have located only one instance in which an accurate image of Truth appeared in the press during her lifetime: a single engraving, drawn from a photograph, that appeared in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1869—a paper known for its prioritization of engravings [Figure 3.2].

In place of the photographic image that so often accompanies public figures in the press today, in the 1860s through the 1880s the phrase that repeatedly accompanied Sojourner Truth’s appearances in print—the “Libyan Sibyl”—instead conveyed a verbal portrait inspired by the mid-nineteenth-century flourishing of American neoclassical sculpture.

Attentiveness to the representation of Truth’s body in print in the absence of photographic reproduction is particularly important because of the relative lack of choices for visual representation of black women in the nineteenth-century press. The descriptor “Libyan Sibyl” distinguished itself from modes of racialized depiction of the body already established in U.S. newspapers for particular contexts relating to slavery, including the runaway slave advertisement. As Marcus Wood points out, such advertisements produced individualized verbal descriptions cataloging physical scars, injuries, and skin color while visually reducing every runaway slave to one of a few typographic characters with which they were juxtaposed: “the images, type-cast or wood-engraved, remained largely standardised over two continents and two

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9 Truth’s 1850 *Narrative* included one engraving not based on a photograph, and the 1875 edition added a second engraving that was based on a photograph, both of which Rohrbach discusses in detail. But, as with her photographs, Truth’s *Narrative* circulated especially in activist circles and did not reach as wide of an audience as newspapers.
centuries. A male was represented by a running clothed figure, carrying a bundle of goods on a stick and passing a tree. A female was represented, most commonly, by a seated clothed figure, resting, and holding a bundle” *(Blind Memory* 80, 87) [Figure 3.3]. A similarly unsuitable visual context familiar to nineteenth-century readers was the cartoon or minstrel show advertisement featuring caricatured African Americans acting out racist stereotypes.\(^{10}\)

In fact, the vocabulary used in print shops in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been recycled into the vocabulary of social perceptions. Stereotype

\(^{10}\) For a focused study of cartoons and racialized representations stemming from Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s most famous work, see Chapter Four of Wood’s *Blind Memory*, “Beyond the cover: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and slavery as global entertainment”: 143-214.
plates, introduced into American print shops in the early decades of the nineteenth century, were metal copies of a typeset page that enabled authors to print new editions of a text without paying for setting the type all over again. From the Greek *stereos*, solid, and *tupos*, impression or type, “stereotype” originally referred to the metal plate that facilitated copying, but the technology’s transformation of mass media in the nineteenth century helped the term gain traction as a general reference to repetition without change and, in the twentieth century, oversimplified preconceptions based on the principle of the “type” (*OED*). Though Sojourner Truth did not particularly like Stowe’s comparison of her to Story’s *Libyan Sibyl*, saying “I don’t want to hear about that old symbol; read me something that is going on now,” the description counteracted racialized precedents for visual description in the press—
what we would now call stereotypes—by appealing to a sculptural paradigm associated with ideal “classical” form (Mabee 114, citing Detroit Advertiser and Tribune, Jan. 11, 1869).

In producing a verbal portrait distinct from that of the “runaway” or the caricature, Stowe turns to the visual language of art criticism, comparing Truth to Story’s Libyan Sibyl as well as to a bronze statuette called “The African Woman at the Fountain” (c.1846) by the French sculptor Charles Cumberworth, which Stowe actually owned [Figure 3.4]. About Truth’s resemblance to the “African Woman,” Stowe writes: “Indeed, she so strongly reminded me of that figure, that, when I recall the events of her life, as she narrated them to me, I imagine her as a living, breathing impersonation of that work of art” (Stowe 473). She goes on to describe Truth’s physical characteristics as statuesque, as I will discuss in further detail below, and she bookends her provocative article title “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” with a reprinted review of Story’s Libyan Sibyl and Cleopatra sculptures, which had been on exhibition at the 1862 London World’s Exposition. Stowe’s rhetorical strategy took advantage of the enthusiasm for sculpture already saturating U.S. and British media.

Neoclassical sculpture was an immensely popular medium for American artists in the mid-nineteenth century, in part as a response to recent findings of sculptures of antiquity, including the ancient Greek Venus de Milo in 1820. Artists from Hiram Powers to William Wetmore Story, Harriet Hosmer, and the African American sculptor Edmonia Lewis took up residence in Rome to study ancient Greek and Roman sculpture and they produced new works inspired by the old. Most famous
of this oeuvre was Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave* (1844), which allegorized slavery—not American slavery, but Greek enslavement by the Turks—as a nude woman with hands enchained, in signature white marble [Figure 3.5]. Powers’s sculpture toured the U.S. beginning in 1847 and was displayed at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851, provoking serious discussion in U.S. newspapers and pamphlets about viewing etiquette and the proper interpretation of idealized female bodies within the constraints of nineteenth-century feminine virtue and modesty. Gradually, neoclassical sculpture became associated with a language of abstraction and virtuous symbolism that counteracted the potential lasciviousness of viewing nude forms.
Art historians suggest that Powers’ *Greek Slave* constituted a significant breakthrough in American viewing practices because it successfully employed “female nudity to express a serious theme,” setting a trend that allowed neoclassical sculpture to flourish at mid-century despite the continued expectation of modesty in real women’s dress and public appearance (Rowe 86). Based on its title and a brief description by Powers, the sculpture was intended as a representation of the fate of a Greek woman captured by Turks during the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century. The threat of impending sexual exploitation in a harem was understood by nineteenth-century viewers, particularly due to the woman’s nudity and her modest attempt to cover her genital area with a chained hand. In addition to the gesture, “a few symbols clothe her in the language of
Victorian virtue. A cross suggests her Christianity and a locket her fidelity to one person” (Winterer 165). At the same time as he displayed mastery of classical sculptural form by echoing the posture of the famous *Venus de’ Medici*, Powers justified the reproduction of female nudity in his sculpture by controlling its narrative with visual and verbal cues: the woman’s exposure was a reminder of the injustices of rape and cultural domination—not to mention an allegorical representation of the Orientalist conflicts of “East” versus “West” and Turks versus Greeks. Powers elaborates her story in his narrative description: “She is now among barbarian strangers…and she stands exposed to the gaze of the people she abhors, and awaits her fate with intense anxiety, tempered indeed by the support of her reliance upon the goodness of God” (Kasson 51, citing Lester, *Artist, Merchant, and Statesman*, 1:86-87).

Pamphlets distributed to American viewers of the *Greek Slave* quoted Powers and emphasized the appropriateness of moral contemplation and sympathy with the Greek slave’s plight (Kasson 57-58). Nineteenth-century critics emphasized again and again how the figure inspired immediate solemnity and respect among audience members, even those who may have come with lascivious intentions. One Philadelphia paper reported, “Of this statue a distinguished American clergyman, whom we had the pleasure to meet in Italy, said, that *were a hundred libertines to collect around it, attracted by its nudity, they would stand abashed and rebuked in its presence*” (“Powers’ Greek Slave,” emphasis in original). Of course, the concern of Powers and American newspaper reviewers in underscoring this point suggests that
they took special care to use the medium of print to prevent just such a congregation of “libertines.” As Joy Kasson points out, pamphlets accompanying sculptural exhibitions should be “considered part of the prescriptive literature of the nineteenth century, like etiquette books, sex manuals, and health guides…they suggested how an audience should behave rather than telling us how spectators actually did view art” (31, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, the prevailing narrative in the press, complemented by first-hand accounts from viewers, replicated the moral piousness of Powers’s narrative. Viewers with Powers’s description in hand would have been ashamed to admit to voyeurism. One clergyman even went so far as to suggest that the Greek Slave surpassed classical masterpieces such as the Venus de’ Medici because it “expressed more than ‘the beauty of mere form, of the moulding of limbs and muscles’…the sensuous appeal of the statue was justified by its higher moral purpose” (Kasson 58). For American audiences, neoclassical sculpture aligned their country’s artistic achievements with that of classical masterpieces, and surpassed classical precedents by infusing the same ideal forms with Christian morals and virtue.

Ironically, however, the sympathies American audiences felt for this idealized white woman in chains did not always provoke explicit comparisons to American slavery. As Kirk Savage explains, “The figure of the black slave was so antithetical to the theory and practice of ideal sculpture that even sculptors sympathetic to the cause [of abolitionism] steered clear of it in their work” (28). The Greek Slave toured in the North and South “all the way to the white-slave center of New Orleans,” the
home of one of its purchasers, without inspiring widespread association with abolitionism (Savage 29). While abolitionist papers such as The North Star certainly appealed to readers to consider the sculpture’s ethical message in light of their cause—“to the feeling heart and discerning eye, all slave girls are GREEK”—most mainstream papers downplayed the comparison (“The Greek Slave,” emphasis in the original). Alternatively, they twisted abolitionists’ condemnation of the irony of American sympathy for the Greek Slave, and not the African-American slave, into an account of reverse racism: “The abolitionists disclaim the ‘Greek slave’ as ‘too white for their philanthropy’” (The Liberator, citing the Boston Post). But in a significant break from this general disregard of parallels with American slavery, in 1851, after the American tour, the British humor magazine Punch published an engraving of “The Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Powers’ ‘Greek Slave’” that replaced Powers’ white marble figure with a caricatured black woman in chains upon a pedestal reading “e pluribus unum” [Figure 3.6]. The satire took aim at the popularity of the Greek Slave among American viewers who opposed or were indifferent to abolitionism. Until Story’s Cleopatra and Libyan Sibyl in 1858 and 1861, which both introduced slightly Africanized facial features in neoclassical form, “The Virginian Slave” constituted the extent of the dialogue in the press surrounding race in ideal sculpture.

One identifiable print context akin to “The Virginian Slave” is the tradition of “sable Venuses” appearing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century printed iconography
and popular culture. Unlike neoclassical sculpture, these figures were repeatedly considered objects of sexual fascination and scientific scrutiny, not sympathy. From Saartjie Baartman as the exoticized “Hottentot Venus” to Thomas Stothard’s “The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies” (1793), sable Venuses were consistently objectified in trans-Atlantic visual culture [Figure 3.7]. Though they drew on the neoclassical sculptural iconicity of the Venus de’ Medici and the Venus de Milo, they did not enter the realm of high art, but rather populated ethnological reports, prints, and libidinal literary works. The reference to the Roman goddess of love operated as an overt hyper-sexualization of these figures as well as an

ironic signifier of visual discrepancy from the classical aesthetic “ideal.” For example, by representing a white Neptune, who is about to be struck with Cupid’s arrow, admiring a black woman on a half shell (a clear visual echo of Botticelli’s Venus), Stothard’s “Voyage of the Sable Venus” “portray[s] the Atlantic crossing as a benign method of procuring black women for the enjoyment of white men” and constitutes “an obscene glossing over of the actual horrors endured by black women making the Middle Passage journey” (Selzer 218).

The overt sexual objectification of sable Venuses contrasts the explicitly suppressed erotic potential of the *Greek Slave*. As one nineteenth-century reviewer pointed out, “it is no doubt true that every undraped ideal female figure must resemble a Venus; but the expression of sorrow, indignation, and shame so strongly
given to the countenance by Mr. Powers” exempted the *Greek Slave* from degrading objectification by viewers (“Mr. Powers’s Statue of the Greek Slave”). By contrast, “Venus was among the most common classical female names given to slaves in America” (joining male counterparts such as Caesar or Cicero), suggesting that the appropriation of the name of the goddess of love operated as a nominal justification for sexual attraction, exploitation, and rape (Winterer 94). While both echoed the classical pose of the *Venus de’ Medici*, Powers’s *Greek Slave* and Stothard’s “Sable Venus” could not have been more differently positioned in relation to the nineteenth-century conceptions of ideal female embodiment.

Stowe’s interposition of Sojourner Truth into the realm of neoclassical sculpture as the “Libyan Sibyl” set her apart from the violently sexualized sable Venuses and other modes of racialized depiction of the body already established in U.S. newspapers, and suggested an alternative visual paradigm for black female neoclassical embodiment. This was done, however, by cloaking Truth’s body in the vocabulary of ideal womanhood associated with white marble sculpture, and not its caricature print parodies. In “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl,” Stowe describes Truth’s appearance in language suited to art criticism. In an ekphrastic verbal portrait, Truth becomes statuesque, a physical form impressed on Stowe’s senses:

I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with any one who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than this woman. In the modern Spiritualistic phraseology, she would be described as having a strong sphere. Her tall form, as she rose up before me, is still vivid to my mind. She was dressed in some stout, grayish stuff, neat and clean, though dusty from travel. On her head, she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban, after the manner of her race. She seemed perfectly self-possessed and at her ease,—in fact, there was almost an unconscious
superiority, not unmixed with a solemn twinkle of humor, in the odd, composed manner in which she looked down on me. Her whole air had at times a gloomy sort of drollery which impressed one strangely. (Stowe 473)

Stowe describes Truth as if she were looking at a sculpture in a gallery, a perspective enhanced by Truth’s height as she “looked down” on Stowe as though from a pedestal. The “stout, grayish stuff” of Truth’s clothing is oddly nonspecific, reminiscent of folds of drapery on a statue. Most dramatically, her whole aura seems to provoke in Stowe a particular attentiveness to composition: from her “tall form” and carefully “arranged” handkerchief to her “odd, composed manner” and “self-possessed…almost…unconscious superiority.” No doubt aware that readers of the Atlantic Monthly were the same audiences who flocked to exhibitions and galleries, Stowe sets up an impression of Truth that draws on idealized sculptural form as a means of communicating physical charisma and ideal womanhood.

The reprinted review of Story’s Cleopatra and Libyan Sibyl at the end of Stowe’s Atlantic Monthly article further consolidates an explicit ekphrastic comparison between Truth’s body and Story’s neoclassical sculpture. Stowe and most other Americans never saw Story’s Libyan Sibyl in person (though Stowe had seen an early model), so they relied on reviews by others and engraved versions of photographs such as one published in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper in 1862 [Figure 3.8]. Despite the fact that the Libyan Sibyl looks nothing like Sojourner Truth, the rhetorical gesture of substituting the sculpture for Truth’s body ultimately mattered more than visual sameness. In the words of the London reviewer,

A secret-keeping looking dame she is, in the full-bloom proportions of ripe womanhood, wherein choosing to place his figure the sculptor has deftly gone
Figure 3.8. “The Sibylla Libyca, by Story, the Great American Sculptor”
Engraving. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (1862)

between the disputed point whether these women were blooming and wise in youth, or deeply furrowed with age and burdened with the knowledge of centuries, as Virgil, Livy, and Gellius say. Good artistic example might be quoted on both sides. Her forward elbow is propped upon one knee; and to keep her secrets close, for this Libyan woman is the closest of all the Sibyls, she rests her shut mouth upon one closed palm, as if holding the African mystery deep in the brooding brain that looks out through mournful, warning eyes. . . . Her face has a Nubian cast, her hair wavy and plaited, as is meet. (qtd. in Stowe 481)

Stowe’s inclusion of the review in her article on Sojourner Truth renders its visual description of the *Libyan Sibyl* applicable to Truth, as well. During one of her vacations in Rome, Stowe had related some details about Truth’s life to William Wetmore Story, and she claims this exchange inspired him to make the sculpture.12

12 “Some years ago, when visiting Rome, I related Sojourner's history to Mr. Story at a breakfast at his house…. The history of Sojourner Truth worked in his mind and led
In fact, in one of the earliest erroneous reports of Truth’s death that peppered the press during the last decades of her life, Stowe imagines the *Libyan Sibyl* as a literal memorial: “But though Sojourner Truth has passed away from among us as a wave of the sea, her memory still lives in one of the loftiest and most original works of modern art, the Libyan Sibyl” (480). The sculpted marble replaces and stands in for her literal body, which has (allegedly) expired. In the wake of Stowe’s article, the proliferation of continued references to Truth—who was very much alive—as the “Libyan Sibyl” continued to imagine her living body as a form of memorial.

Like Powers’s *Greek Slave*, Story’s *Libyan Sibyl* had an accompanying cultural narrative, hinted at in the aura of mystery cultivated by the above review. One of ten sibyls adapted and described by Christians of late antiquity through the Renaissance as having foretold the coming of Christ, by the nineteenth century this anachronistic adaptation had been discredited and the story of the classical Libyan Sibyl was open to retelling. The main cultural referent for the Libyan Sibyl prior to Story’s sculpture was Michelangelo’s early sixteenth century depiction of her on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that

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him into the deeper recesses of the African nature,—those unexplored depths of being and feeling, mighty and dark as the gigantic depths of tropical forests, mysterious as the hidden rivers and mines of that burning continent whose life-history is yet to be. A few days after, he told me that he had conceived the idea of a statue which he should call the Libyan Sibyl. Two years subsequently, I revisited Rome, and… Mr. Story requested me to come and repeat to him the history of Sojourner Truth, saying that the conception had never left him. I did so; and a day or two after, he showed me the clay model of the Libyan Sibyl” (Stowe 480-481). Though Stowe’s account is often taken for fact, Story himself never mentioned Sojourner Truth in relation to his *Libyan Sibyl*, though he had certainly heard about her from Stowe, so he may or may not have had her in mind while designing his sculpture (Painter 158).
Michelangelo may have chosen to depict the five sibyls he did “to indicate the broad geographical reach of Christian prophecy within the pagan world,” representing in turn Rome, Greece, Ionia, Asia, and Africa with the Cumaean, Delphic, Erythraean, Persian and Libyan sibyls (144). But the implications of “Libyan” for nineteenth-century Americans were more complex than that, extending most emphatically to contemporary racial, rather than ancient geographic and Messianic, associations. While the Cumaean sibyl retained a coherent narrative due to her prominence in Vergil’s *Aeneid* and “Fourth Eclogue” and her association with ancient Rome, the story of the more obscure Libyan sibyl’s prophetic power was open to adaptation.

Perhaps taking his cue from the newly popularized theme of slavery in neoclassical sculpture in the aftermath of the *Greek Slave*’s American tour, Story reinterpreted the nature of the classical Libyan Sibyl’s prophetic vision for modern circumstances: as a foretelling of African enslavement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In Story’s words, “She is looking out of her black eyes into futurity and sees the terrible fate of her race. This is the theme of the figure—Slavery on the horizon, and I made her head as melancholy and severe as possible” (qtd. in Painter 160). Story’s rendering was sympathetic to the prescient suffering of the sibyl, but he did not explicitly reference abolitionism in word or symbol, nor did he ever indicate that his sculpture was inspired by Sojourner Truth, as Stowe claimed (Painter 158). Despite the proximate timing of the sculpture’s production (1861) in relation to the outbreak of the Civil War, Story’s expatriate status in Rome distanced him from American politics, and, as Painter points out, “Emancipation is nowhere in Story's
perspective as he describes his statue's gaze” (160). In her *Atlantic Monthly* article, however, Stowe rereads the *Libyan Sibyl* as predicting not slavery, but Emancipation, an efficient way of connecting this neoclassical icon with Truth’s antislavery politics. Despite his detachment from abolitionist politics, Story’s sculpture joined a classical icon with a contemporary racial injustice, laying the groundwork for a strong abolitionist interpretation that identified the sibyl’s prophetic power as a symbol for Americans’ moral responsibility to end slavery.

A transcribed speech by abolitionist Wendell Phillips provides further cultural context for the use of the figure of the classical sibyl as a tool for inspiring belief in the urgent necessity of U.S. Emancipation and supporting legislation. On August 1, 1861 in Abington, Massachusetts, Phillips commemorated the anniversary of the British abolition of slavery by lamenting the lost opportunity for a similar peaceful legislative action by Americans:

What is the use of referring to it [the British example]? It is no longer within our reach. We neglected to seize the opportunity—it is gone! Thirty years ago, in England, when Lord Brougham was advocating the emancipation of the slaves, I remember he used with great effect the trite classical story of the sybil [sic] who came to the Roman king with nine books for sale, represented as indispensable to the safety of Rome. She named her price;—the proud king waved her aside. The sybil [sic] left, burned three of the books, and returned, offering six at the same cost. The confident king waved her a second time aside. She went, and returned again with three, still for the same price. And then Rome bought the sacred pledge of her safety, diminished to one third, at the same sacrifice. Twenty years ago, God set us the example of peaceful, moral emancipation, by ordinary force of law. We dashed it aside. He offers us now, at the same cost, emancipation at the mouth of the cannon—nothing else. (“Speech of Wendell Phillips, Esq. at the Celebration of W. I. Emancipation, At Abington, Mass., Aug. 1st, 1861”)
Phillips recalls a familiar story for nineteenth-century auditors: the folkloric tale of how the *Libri Sibyllini*, or Sibylline books, a collection of oracular sayings in Greek hexameter, came into the possession of Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, in the sixth century BCE. Phillips’s analogy between the price of Rome’s acquisition of the *Libri Sibyllini* and American Emancipation draws its strength from three core principles: the historical success of the Roman Republic, the role of divine mediation via the Sibylline Books in that success, and the sense of urgent timing. Phillips suggests that Emancipation is God’s will, and that any hesitation on the part of the U.S. government in meeting this “price” decreases the value of the goods: the safety and prosperity of the nation. With peaceful emancipation already lost to history, what could be worse than emancipation “at the mouth of the cannon”—i.e. Civil War? In answer, he raises the specter of the Haitian Revolution, the all-out slave revolt “won in blood and fire . . . in the blood of seventy thousand Frenchmen” and asks, “What is the policy that may save us from that last extremity of bloody emancipation? The British model is gone. The only question for us is, how far short can we stop of St. Domingo?”

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13 This was not the only instance of Phillip’s use of the “trite” story of the Roman sibyl. In December 1863, he protested the terms of Lincoln’s invitation to the rebel states to rejoin the Union, arguing that he did not go far enough to protect the rights of newly Emancipated African Americans: “But the terms which would have been gladly accepted in 1859—naked, bald, technical liberty for the negro, are not to be thought of for a moment in 1863. (Applause.) Let me remind you of the trite story of the Roman sibyl [sic]. She came to Tarquin with her nine books, and offered them for a thousand crowns; turned away, she came back with six books at the same price of a thousand crowns; refused, she came back a third time with only three books, still for a thousand crowns. So the conscience of the North, in 1821, would gladly have granted peace at the price of only the freedom of the territories. In 1831, she
Firmly entrenching his argument in the rhetoric of the American nation, Phillips uses the story of the Sibylline Books as a cautionary tale against self-sabotage: if Tarquinius had not balked at the price of the nine scrolls in the first place, Rome’s safety would have been ensured; instead, “Rome bought the sacred pledge of her safety, diminished to one third, at the same sacrifice.” Americans, Phillips suggests, must meet the price of Emancipation before it destroys the nation. The *Libri Sibyllini* were believed to protect the security and wellbeing of the Roman Republic because they were the source of divine advice in times of natural or state disaster or unexplained prodigies—a means of ensuring the *pax deum*, the favor of the gods. As Eric M. Orlin explains,

> The primary function of the Sibylline Books . . . was to restore the *pax deum*, and the overwhelming majority of Sibylline responses consisted of the prescription of rituals for that purpose. These expiations took one of two forms, either an immediate, one-time rite or the creation of a lasting institution...[such as] the foundation of temples or annual games. (92)

Safeguarded in the Temple of Jupiter until 83 B.C.E., the *Libri Sibyllini* were protected and interpreted by a select group of citizens appointed by the Roman Senate—the *decemviri sacris faciundis*—who presented their findings to the Senate, who in turn took responsibility for how the oracles were applied. Though the Senate had the power to determine what scrolls were or were not “authentically Sibylline,” demanded immediate and total emancipation wherever the flag floats. Both were contemptuously refused, and after the gun at Sumter, followed by three years of blood and costly war, there is no safe, no admissible condition of peace, but the substantial, practical protection of the freedom of the negro, and the elements of national life so arranged as to guarantee peace and democracy forever within the borders of the nation. (Applause)” (“Speech of Wendell Phillips, Esq., at the Cooper Institute, New York, On Tuesday Evening, December 22, 1863, on President Lincoln’s Message and Proclamation”).
and sponsored the resulting ritual actions, the figure of the Sibyl remained the key to popular faith in their restorative power (Orlin 80). It is this sense of the urgency of divine remediation for the protection of the state that Phillips foregrounds in his Emancipation speech.

Though in practice the Roman *Libri Sibyllini* had less to do with prophecy or predictions of the future than with the prescription of religious rituals, nineteenth-century Americans would have associated the story recited by Phillips with any and every “sibyl” of antiquity, and so with prophetic utterance. The folkloric blending of one sibyl into another had considerable precedent in antiquity. The sibyl who allegedly sold the scrolls to Tarquinius was commonly identified by ancient sources as either the Cumaean or Erythraean Sibyl, an ambiguity that may be explained by the suggestion in some texts that the Cumaean Sibyl migrated to Rome from Erythrae in modern-day Turkey (Orlin 77, note 1; 79, note 10). After the destruction of the *Libri Sibyllini* in a fire in 83 B.C.E., members of the Senate took it upon themselves to collect a new set of oracles which could be determined authentically Sibylline: first from Erythrae, where “only one thousand verses were found, perhaps equivalent to a single book,” and then from “other reputed homes of the Sibyl” (Orlin 79). This incident suggests that existing oracular verses from different geographical locations could be united under the rubric of the Roman *Libri Sibyllini* in a cross-cultural blending supported by the expansion of Roman territory.

By the time Varro recorded his influential account of the Sibyls in the first century B.C.E. (in a now-lost work cited by Lactantius, a Christian author of late
antiquity, in his Divinae Institutiones), their cultural prominence had further expanded their geographic and conceptual range:

It is noteworthy that Varro lists many more Sibyls than his predecessors. He does this by casting his net wider so as to include not only those from Greek sources, but also some for whom he cites only Roman authorities. Also he is prepared to accept all kinds of evidence, not only prose writers but also poets such as Euripides. His sources are authors, not the Sibylline oracles. (Parke 31)

The Libyan Sibyl was an addition authorized by Varro, taking her place in an expanded list of ten sibyls. Whereas the most famous sibyls were associated with shrines—sites such as Delphi and Cumae where there is historical evidence for oracular activity—the Libyan Sibyl, “was simply a literary fantasy, and probably achieved her early position in the list from her mythological setting” (Parke 32).

Varro identifies her as “the second of the Sibyls, a Libyan, whom Euripides mentioned in the prologue of his Lamia,” a now-lost work (Fragments 557).14 Further investigation of historical evidence for a Libyan Sibyl is conflicted, and limited by a scarcity of sources: “Pausanias 10,12,1 records a tradition that the most ancient Sibyl at Delphi was a daughter of Zeus and Lamia, and called Sibylla by the Libyans. Whether Pausanias reflects Euripides in any way is not known, but it seems likely that there was a Euripidean satyr play of this name which was lost very early” (Fragments 557). For William Wetmore Story, the important consideration was that a figure known as the “Libyan Sibyl” had been preserved in historical imagination by

14 “Diodorus cites two verses (F 472m below) which may have provided the basis for Varro's information,” but which are the only remaining fragments of that work: “Who does not know <my> name that men revile, Lamia, the Libyan by race?” (Fragments 557-559).
Christians of late antiquity and Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, and
strongly associated with a prophetic tradition.

As I have suggested above, the “Libyan” modifier acted mostly as a racial cue
in Story’s sculpture and Stowe’s deployment of it, in a way that projected nineteenth-
century racial tensions backward onto antiquity. Stowe’s *Atlantic Monthly* article
refers to Sojourner Truth as variously African, Ethiopian, Egyptian, Nubian, and
Libyan. In relation to Truth’s person, Stowe most consistently uses the former terms
“African” and “Ethiopian,” whereas the latter three terms appear specifically in
conjunction with Story’s sculpture: the London reviewer quoted by Stowe writes,
“Her face has a Nubian cast,” and she is “partly draped, with the characteristic
Egyptian gown” (481). What appears as geographical non-specificity on the part of
nineteenth-century critics is in fact a racialized redeployment of the geographic and
ethnographic terminology of ancient Greeks and Romans. In the fifth century B.C.E.,
the Greek historian Herodotus reports on the peoples and customs of the continent
known as “Libya,” a region largely unknown to his Greek contemporaries, but which
had reportedly been circumnavigated by a company of Phoenicians. Swayed by a
Mediterranean perspective, Herodotus underestimates the longitudinal vastness of the
African continent.\(^{15}\) As such, he divided its aboriginal inhabitants into only two
groups, “the Libyans in the north and the Ethiopians in the south” (*The Histories

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\(^{15}\) Herodotus reports that the Phoenicians “said (what some may believe, though I do
not) that in sailing around Libya they had the sun on their right hand” (*The Histories*
4.42). This detail suggests that the reported journey was indeed authentic and that
Libya was the accepted name for the entire African continent, since “as the ship
sailed west round the Cape of Good Hope, the sun of the southern hemisphere would
be on its right” (*The Histories*, editor’s note 22).
4.197). For Herodotus, “Libyan” could stand in synecdochically for the entire continent, or more particularly for northern Africa. Even in the ancient world Egypt constituted a separate region—much more well-known to the Greeks—to the east of the Nile river.

The ancient designations of Egyptian, Libyan, and Ethiopian were very familiar to nineteenth-century Americans, and they each became the focus of nineteenth-century projections about race in antiquity. In particular, Herodotus was a much-cited source for African American intellectuals embroiled in the debate over the ethnic identity of ancient Egyptians: as Henry Highland Garnet wrote, “We learn from Herodotus, that the ancient Egyptians were black, and had woolly hair” (qtd. in Trafton 234). Proponents of Ethiopianism characterized Ethiopia as definitively black and as the cultural source of Egypt’s greatness, refuting white Egyptologists’ attempts to disassociate ancient Egypt from “the blackness of Africa which was seen to surround it” (Trafton 9). At the same time, Ethiopia figured prominently in abolitionist rhetoric as a symbol for enslaved African Americans’ desire for Emancipation and God’s salvation via Psalms 68:31, “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God” (qtd. in Trafton 258).

“Nubia” referred to a region along the Nile south of Egypt (present-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt) that was subsumed under the broader label of “Ethiopia” in the ancient world and so was considered generally synonymous with it in the nineteenth century. The term “Africa” came into prominent usage under the Romans
as a designation for the Carthaginians, who they named *afri*, and later as a name for the Roman province established after the defeat of Carthage in the Third Punic War.

Stowe’s article on Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” invokes ancient geographic and ethnological terms (African, Ethiopian, Egyptian, Nubian, and Libyan) in a way that places both Truth and Story’s sculpture at the crossroads of the heated nineteenth-century debate over “racial” identifications in the ancient world and the present moment. Neoclassical sculpture became a focal point for policing and encoding racial identity. Phrenology’s idealization of classical sculpture as depicting the most advanced human form—one which was explicitly contrasted with African physiognomy—engaged classical art and aesthetics in an emerging tradition of scientific racism that purported to provide an empirical basis for racial discrimination. The fact that, since antiquity, “sculptors could even create exact molds of the human face and body in plaster . . . gave their art a unique scientific and documentary power that lasted even after the advent of photography. This helps explain why racial theorists looked to classical sculpture specifically as…an authenticating document of a normative white body” (Savage 8-9). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the demonstrated “documentary power” of sculpture solidified the status of classical form as a version of “whiteness” in burgeoning debates over racial identification.

One of the reasons that the popularity of the *Greek Slave* extended even to Southern slaveholding states was that the sculpted woman’s physical features were considered unequivocally “white” by a public attuned to minute differences in facial structure. In the late eighteenth century, the Dutch taxonomist Petrus Camper
published his findings on “facial angle,” a measure he developed for “systematic evaluation of the profile measurement from the tip of the forehead to the greatest protrusion of the lips” for humans and animals (Wallis 53). Camper wrote that ancient Greco-Roman sculptures, as icons of European beauty, displayed a facial angle surpassing that of the average person: “classical sculpture derived its grace from a facial line of 100 degrees while the average European's was 85 degrees” (Hamilton 46). Furthermore, Camper explicitly contrasted the facial angle of classical sculptures with that of Africans, classifying the latter as closer to animals: “When I made these lines incline forwards, I obtained the face of an antique; backwards of a negroe; still more backwards, the lines which mark an ape, a dog, a snipe, &c” (Wallis 53, citing Petrus Camper, The Works of the Late Professor Camper, on the Connexion between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary &c &c. London: C. Dilly, 1794). Nineteenth-century enthusiasts of phrenology and physiognomy translated Camper’s findings on skull shape and facial angle into derogatory classifications of racial “types,” as exemplified by the oft-cited diagram in J.C. Nott and George R. Gliddon’s Types of Mankind (1854) that places an image of the Apollo Belvedere in hierarchical supremacy over exaggerated “backwards” facial angles of the “Negro” and the “Young Chimpanzee” [Figure 3.9].

Despite its thematic associations with slavery, Powers’s Greek Slave, in its clearly classical facial angle and its evocation of the posture and form of the Venus de’ Medici, operated as an icon of white—not black—suffering. William Wetmore Story’s Cleopatra and Libyan Sibyl, by contrast, deliberately introduced facial
features that deviated from the white neoclassical ideal. As Kirsten Pai Buick points out, “a key signifier of physiognomy is the nose; and although it is difficult for us to see, it was the broad bridge and slightly thickened lips of Story’s Cleopatra that alerted nineteenth-century audiences to her racial identity as black African” (203). The Libyan Sibyl displayed similarly “racialized” facial features. A careful comparison to the profile of Powers’s Greek Slave or sculptures of antiquity would also reveal a less pronounced facial angle according to Camper’s schema, suggesting to viewers a deliberate departure from “European” physiognomy. Story himself described the Libyan Sibyl with reference to racial “types” classified by taxonomists. He wrote that he was “not at all shirking the real African type…. I have taken the pure Coptic head and figure, the great massive sphinx-face, full-lipped, long-eyed,
low-browed and lowering, and the largely-developed limbs of the African” (Painter 158-159, citing W. W. Story to Charles Eliot Norton, 15 August 1861, in James, William Wetmore Story and His Friends, Vol. 2, pp. 70-71, 75-76). For both sculptures, but especially the Cleopatra, Story’s choices stirred up an already existing public debate regarding the racial affiliations of notable figures of antiquity.

Cleopatra in her various nineteenth-century incarnations in sculpture, literary sketches, and performance was a focal point for disagreement: was she “white” or “black”—“the ‘Queen of Egypt’ or the ‘Egyptian Queen’?” (Buick 183). Many Americans wanted to claim her as unequivocally Greek and therefore “white” because of her status as a source of inspiration for revered European artistic and literary works, particularly Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. Another motivation was the desire by some to classify all elite Egyptians of antiquity as “white” in order to justify a program of continued racial stratification in America. Proponents of this agenda used a falsified classical precedent as the model for “natural” racial relations. For example, “Dr. Samuel George Morton published Crania Aegyptiaca in 1844 in which he ‘proved’ through cranial and archaeological evidence that Egyptians of the ruling class were not Negroes. Contrary to what abolitionists supposed, Morton argued that blacks had occupied the same servile positions in ancient Egypt as in modern America” (Buick 183-184). A “black Cleopatra” such as Story’s threatened the nineteenth-century social order because she embodied the idea that blackness was not biologically or culturally inferior to whiteness. Outrage against the perceived appropriation of a European cultural icon such as Cleopatra was such an everyday
topic of conversation that even schoolchildren could grasp its implications. In 1877, the Boston Daily Advertiser reported that a “little girl astonished a gentleman visitor by asking him what he thought of Cleopatra, adding that she ‘did not like Story’s statue of Cleopatra, because it was Egyptian, and it ought to have been Greek, for Cleopatra was a daughter of the Ptolemies’” (“In General”).

Like Cleopatra and her varying significations for nineteenth-century Americans, Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” cannot be pinned down: does “Libyan” designate continental Africa, or only the northern Africa of the Berbers? Story writes that The Libyan Sibyl’s features are “thoroughly African—Libyan Africa of course, not Congo” (qtd. in Painter 158). But what is especially striking is that Stowe knew that African slaves transported to the Americas originated primarily in sub-Saharan western Africa. Truth’s ancestry did not line up geographically with any of the ancient regions of Ethiopia, Egypt, or Libya, but that did not stop Stowe from deploying “Libya” and “Ethiopia” as racialized terms specifically meant to contrast with an imagined white classical tradition, including ancient Greece, Rome, and Ptolemaic Egypt: “Sojourner, singing this hymn, seemed to impersonate the fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations, but burning after God in her tropic heart, and stretching her scarred hands towards the glory to be revealed” (477). In other parts of the article, Stowe infuses Truth’s dialogue and mannerisms with racial

16 Here Stowe glosses the oft-cited Psalms 68:31, “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God,” perhaps taking inspiration in her allegory of Truth as “Ethiopia” from Truth’s Narrative, in which it is reported that a note from a “spiritually-minded brother in Bristol” that Truth carried with her to Hartford circa 1843 read, “SISTER,—I send you this living messenger, as I believe her to be one that God loves. Ethiopia is stretching forth her hands unto God” (Narrative 85).
stereotypes, transcribing Truth’s words in erroneous dialect and adding a sketch of Truth’s grandson, James Caldwell, as a minstrelized “African Puck,” “the fattest, jolliest woolly-headed little specimen of Africa that one can imagine…grinning and showing his glistening white teeth in a state of perpetual merriment” (474). Stowe’s ekphrastic portrait of Truth as statuesque invokes a visual attentiveness normally held in reserve for high art, but she repeatedly undercuts her own rhetorical strategy. The ambiguity of Stowe’s alignment of Truth with a sculpture which Story intended to represent a North African “type” in neoclassical form, together with her insistence on Truth’s racially stereotyped “Ethiopian” nature, presents a complicated site of collision between neoclassical aesthetics and racialized rhetoric.

While Stowe’s appeal to a sculptural paradigm in her representation of Truth’s body as the “Libyan Sibyl” offered an alternative to more blatantly racist visual representations of black women’s bodies in the nineteenth-century press—including the runaway slave advertisement and the political cartoon—it too contained potentially damaging connotations for black women. Imagined in sculptural form, the black female body again becomes an object for display and purchase. In an article gleefully titled “MRS. STOWE A SLAVEHOLDER,” The Daily Scioto Gazette in Chillicothe, Ohio took advantage of this resonance to point a finger at Stowe for accepting the bronze Charles Cumberworth statuette “The African Woman at the Fountain” as a gift from the organizers of the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar in 1853.17

17 This statuette has proved a source of confusion for Truth scholars: Painter misidentifies the artist as the “Victorian sculptor Richard Cumberworth”; Carla Peterson hypothesizes that the sculpture being referred to is Cumberworth’s Marie à
Like the *Punch* engraving of “The Virginian Slave,” the article names an underlying dissonance between the trade in art objects visually or nominally linked to the theme of slavery and the real-life trade in human bodies. In comparing Truth to Story’s *Libyan Sibyl*, a sculpture sold together with the *Cleopatra* for the sum of “3,000 guineas,” as well as to Cumberworth’s statuette which remained in her possession throughout her lifetime, Stowe raises an uneasy—but unspoken—parallel with Truth’s past life as a slave (“Mr. Story, the American sculptor”). If Stowe could be termed a “slaveholder”—even in jest—for owning the Cumberworth statuette, Truth’s new status as a “sculpture” in “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” can also be viewed as a metaphorical extension of her former commodification as a slave.\(^\text{18}\) The metaphorical specter of the auction block arises again decades later in an 1876 notice in the San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* claiming that Sojourner Truth was “on exhibition at the Centennial.” While Truth was in fact ill and could not attend the

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*la Fontaine* (a different statuette in the same series); and Savage suggests it is “now-lost” (Painter 154, Peterson 35-38, Savage 15). The confusion stems from its title: Stowe called it “The Negro Woman at the Fountain,” but it was also called “The African Woman at the Fountain” by nineteenth-century Americans; the Louvre calls it *Marie revenant de la Fontaine*, while English speakers now typically title it “The Nubian Water-Bearer.” Stowe’s original statuette resides at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut. Two scholars studying gift books, Valerie Domenica Levy and Meaghan Marrissa Fritz, have supplied confirmation by way of a story published by Maria Weston Chapman about Charles Cumberworth in the 1853 *Liberty Bell* titled “The Sculptor of the Torrid Zone” (Levy 65-66; Fritz 31-58). Anne Warren Weston sent the statuette to Stowe with an accompanying letter and a copy of the *Liberty Bell* on January 17, 1853, writing, “The genius that conceived & executed ‘The African Woman at the Fountain’ cannot fail to find the appreciation that is its best reward from one who has so vividly depicted the sufferings & the character of an outraged & persecuted race” (Weston).\(^\text{18}\) Fritz offers an extended reading of the Cumberworth statuette as a commodity object within the Anti-Slavery Bazaar and gift book culture (31-58).
Centennial, her intention had been to sell her book and photographs, not to put her body on visual display next to Story’s new *Medea* or John Mott’s nude *Andromache*.

Real profitability can be traced to Stowe’s earnings for writing the *Atlantic Monthly* article—Painter estimates she was paid $200—but Stowe also benefited from a more insidious form of “ownership” of Truth’s public image (153). Stowe’s rhetoric of authentication in her article mirrors a range of white-authored paratexts in nineteenth-century culture, particularly the conventional slave narrative preface, in which a white abolitionist “verifies” the authenticity of the contents, and so the authenticity of the black body. Expanding the definition of paratexts traditionally supported by book historians—printed materials extraneous to the author’s main text (such as front matter in a book)—to encompass a range of supplementary textual materials including free papers carried on one’s person or a fugitive slave notice, Beth McCoy suggests that the rhetorical effects of such accessories apply to physical bodies as well as their textual representations. Stowe’s naming of Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” in the title of her essay can be understood as a kind of paratext that, like a caption to a photograph, introduces the body and shapes people’s perceptions of it. This “paratext” operated literally as the title to numerous newspaper articles, but also figuratively as a neoclassical sculptural paradigm for thinking about Truth’s body that could supersede even the physical presence of its referent. Truth’s illiteracy serves to accentuate Stowe’s apparent “ownership” of Truth’s public image. Truth’s oratorical performances become the “text” which Stowe “verifies”; but in the absence of an accompanying written account authored by Truth, Stowe’s verification is of a
version of Truth wholly of her own making, and she extricates a literal and metaphorical profit.

Stowe’s written impersonation of Truth in “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” has a spoken precedent. When Stowe visited Story in Rome she would often adopt an affected “negro dialect” and tell Sojourner Truth anecdotes for the amusement of his circle: “Story was so enchanted by Stowe's impersonation of Truth's ‘ringing barytone’ that he asked her repeatedly to do Truth for his friends” (Painter 154, citing Hedrick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, p. 270; and Edward Wagenknecht, Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 131). Stowe had developed a knack for producing her own version of Southern “black vernacular in Uncle Tom's Cabin and its stage adaptations, and she easily transferred this profitable skill to her anecdotes of Truth in person and in the Atlantic Monthly—despite the fact that Truth had a Dutch accent, not a Southern one, from speaking low Dutch while growing up in New York.19 This mode of “doing Truth” resonates uncomfortably with blackface impersonations popular in minstrelsy as well as in one-person shows. In 1879, a Philadelphia paper reported that the character impersonator Helen Potter had performed a piece on Sojourner Truth, among others: “The ‘Interview to Defeat Robinson’ was a neat little

19 Transcriptions of Truth’s speeches often used Southern dialect to group her together with others of her race, and Stowe’s impression of her is one of the most egregious: “the daughter [of John and Sally Dumont], Gertrude Dumont, protested that Truth’s speech was nothing like the mock-southern dialect that careless reporters used. Rather, it was ‘very similar to that of the unlettered white people of [New York in] her time’” (Painter 7, citing H. Hendricks, “Sojourner Truth,” National Magazine XVI (1892): 671).
political satire, and the ‘Talk to Women a la Sojourner Truth,’ although better in make-up than in acting, was a decided bit” (“Helen Potter’s Pleiades”). Potter was well known for her impersonations of public figures and characters including Susan B. Anthony and Shakespeare’s Cleopatra: she was skilled in costuming and voice. While nothing more is known of the nature of Potter’s “Talk to Women a la Sojourner Truth,” she likely drew on well known lines reported by Stowe and Gage and used blackface make-up. In light of Potter’s for-profit impersonation, Stowe’s conflicting tropes of the ekphrastic sculptural body and the minstrel caricature can be jointly understood as maximizing her commodification of Truth.

The ambiguity of representations of Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” resulting from Stowe’s sculptural paradigm can be productively juxtaposed with Truth’s own rhetorical and performative strategies. The following section considers Truth’s responses to the sibyl trope in overlapping mediums of oratory, print, and photography, theorizing the encoding of neoclassicism in Truth’s ekphrastic self-representations.

II. Re-Embodying Visual Emblems of Race and Nation

There has been much recent scholarly interest in the role of visual media in nineteenth-century taxonomies of race, abolitionist depictions of the suffering slave, and African American self-representation. Consideration of the invention of

20 See especially Wood’s Blind Memory: visual representations of slavery in England and America 1780-1865 (2000) and The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation (2010); Michael A. Chaney’s Fugitive
photography in 1839 and its increasingly accessible forms in the following decades of course plays a key role in critical appraisals of nineteenth-century visual paradigms. Sarah Blackwood argues that the invention of photography “created a textual revolution as much as a visual one” and that antebellum African American writers such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs presented innovative forms of rhetorical engagement with photographic technologies (94-95).21 Radiclani Clytus traces the impact of the visual on abolitionist rhetoric back to other technological innovations such as the mass-produced engravings in the American Anti-Slavery Society’s 1830s pamphlet campaign. He argues further that the particularly “ocularcentric ethos” of American abolitionism—in which visual representations of slave bodies in pain or suffering are employed to sway audiences to the cause—is “rooted in the eighteenth century’s cult of humanitarian sensibility and its treatment of sympathy as an emotion ‘stirred primarily through sight’” (292). Clytus’s project offers insight into the larger historical and cultural currents influencing abolitionists’ privileging of the visual, while Blackwood’s essay pinpoints its impact on African American verbal self-representation.

Abolitionism’s “ocularcentric ethos,” when considered as a rhetorical tool for persuasion, has much in common with the use of ekphrastic description in ancient

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21 Blackwood also discusses the pre-photographic technology of the camera obscura.

Roman forensic oratory. Ruth Webb traces the history of ekphrasis in ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric, showing how in the ancient world ekphrasis functioned as a more expansive category than it is generally considered today, that is, not just as a verbal description of a work of art, but as a rhetorical tool for inspiring auditors to visualize any scene, object, person, or event:

an ekphrasis can be of any length, of any subject matter, composed in verse or prose, using any verbal techniques, as long as it ‘brings its subject before the eyes’ or, as one of the ancient authors says, ‘makes listeners into spectators’…. So, while the visual arts may be literally absent from this definition of ekphrasis and from most of the discussions by ancient rhetoricians, the idea of the visual underpins this mode of speech which rivals the effects of painting or sculpture, creating virtual images in the listener's mind. (8-9, emphasis in the original)

As Webb explains, in the Greek etymology “the preposition has an intensive force, meaning ‘in full,’ ‘utterly.’ So to compose an ek-phrase, is ‘to tell in full,’ to give all the details” (74-75). Aside from famous literary examples such as Homer’s depiction of Achilles’s shield, one of the most important contexts for ekphrasis in the Greco-Roman tradition was forensic oratory, in which auditors were invited through verbal description to visualize key evidence as if they themselves had been eyewitnesses. Such evidence might include the scene of a ruined city, or the circumstances of an accidental death, or the facial expressions and bodily demeanor of a defendant.

In Book Six of Institutio Oratoria, Quintilian writes that a specific aspect of ekphrasis called enargeia, the “quality by which a speech seems not so much to say [dicere] something as to display [ostendere] it,” is the defining feature of a successful
emotional appeal (6.2.32). If the orator has the capacity to vividly imagine “rerum absentium,” or absent things, and feel and communicate real emotion in regard to them, auditors will see and feel in turn and the argument will be successful (6.2.29). This practice of inspiring a vivid picture in the listener’s imagination is used specifically for the purpose of arousing empathetic emotion, since persuasion is the ultimate goal: “what enargeia, and thus ekphrasis, seek to imitate is not so much an object, or scene, or person in itself, but the effect of seeing that thing” (Webb 127-128). In The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), Adam Smith defines “pity or compassion” as “the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner”—in other words, either by eyewitnessing or by ekphrasis (qtd. in Clytus 293). Thus the culture of “spectatorial sympathy” that Clytus assigns particularly to abolitionists and Enlightenment-era humanists such as Smith has a long history extending back to ancient Roman courtrooms, where ekphrastic rhetorical arguments took their place alongside physical evidence (294).

An important difference between ancient and modern ekphrasis, however, is that the expansion of visual technologies such as mass-media illustration and photography in the nineteenth century introduced new methods of visual communication that impacted verbal discursive strategies, too. As Clytus points out, “The AASS [American Anti-Slavery Society] became invested in ocularcentric tropes

22 “Insequetur ENARGEIA, quae a Cicerone inlustratio et evidentia nominatur, quae non tam dicere videtur quam ostendere”: Quintilian describes the Greek word enargeia as akin to illustratio or evidentia in Latin as used by Cicero, the former referring to brightness and the latter to a distinctness of language (6.2.32).
at the very moment when advancements in print technology enabled the society to cheaply produce illustrations at unprecedented rates” (295). Whereas Quintilian ridicules the idea of deferring to, for example, a painted portrait instead of the power of words for rhetorical persuasion—“For what imbecility [infantia] must there be in a petitioner who would believe a mute image [mutam effigiem] more eloquent than his own speaking!”—the nineteenth-century culture of print and photography valorized new visual media as authentic vehicles for persuasion (6.1.32).23 The discourse around the photograph as an unmediated representation of reality—“hailed,” for example, “by William Henry Fox Talbot as resulting from ‘the pencil of nature,’ and...understood by many, including Edgar Allen Poe, as ‘infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands’”—created new standards for verbal representation and persuasion as the traditional material for ekphrastic description, the painting or sculpture, was superseded by a reproducible realist mode (Blackwood 111). For example, both Blackwood and W. J. T. Mitchell note the rhetorical reliance on terms borrowed from photography in descriptions of slave narratives in the abolitionist press, “often center[ing] on questions of truthfulness and objectivity in representing the human subject” (Blackwood 97) and “compar[ing] them to ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ which provide ‘transparent access’ to slavery and are to be praised in proportion to the sense of ‘ocular conviction’ they provide” (Mitchell 185).

23 “Quae enim est actoris infantia qui mutam effigiem magis quam orationem pro se putet locuturam?” (Quintilian 6.1.32).
But despite this rhetoric of visual objectivity, photography is not devoid of political and aesthetic agendas, and its appearance in 1839 by way of the daguerreotype most often reinforced rather than changed how people thought about visual classification. For example, the natural historian Louis Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes taken in 1850 were “designed to analyze the physical differences between European whites and African blacks, but at the same time they were meant to prove the superiority of the white race” (Wallis 40). Their embedded agenda of visual scrutiny participated in the same recourse to racial “types” as the craniology of Morton and the facial angles of Camper, but with the added rhetorical benefit of visual realism: “Photography strengthened the seeming reality of the type by objectifying the individual and by using props and other details to accentuate the ‘truth’ of the depiction” (Wallis 49). In this way photography adapted itself to, rather than fundamentally altered, the dominant visual discourses of nineteenth-century America.

Abolitionist iconography is yet another mediated lens. Just as racial taxonomists continually returned to physiognomic details of skull shape and bodily features, abolitionist visual media continually returned to the icon of the slave as supplicant. In 1787, the London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) produced as its official seal an image of a slave kneeling in chains under the words “Am I not a man and a brother?” The seal quickly became a rallying symbol for abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time as it entered the visual language of reform-minded respectability and fashion: “In its
manifestation as a mass-produced Wedgwood ceramic medallion the image became so generally fashionable in the late 1780s and early 1790s as to be worn as a broach or hairpin by society ladies, and was incorporated into the lids of snuff boxes” (Wood, Blind Memory, 22). In 1826, a female version of the icon and motto, “Am I not a woman and a sister?” adorned the publications of the Ladies Negro's Friend Society of Birmingham, England, and was soon adopted by American reformers [Figure 3.10]. These icons of the kneeling male and female slave in chains became instant visual shorthand for the cause of abolitionism. They were reproduced most prominently in abolitionist newspapers, but also appeared in household items, fashion accessories, coins, and even commemorative sculpture.

The supplicating slave icon saturated public imagination so thoroughly that readers or listeners encountering the words “Am I not a man and a brother?” or its counterpart “Am I not a woman and a sister?” immediately pictured the image via ekphrastic association. This correlation between word and image has particular relevance for Sojourner Truth. Carleton Mabee suggests that Gage’s journalistic invention of what are now Truth’s most famous “words” was based on this very motto: “The ‘Ar’n’t I a Woman?’ expression, as Gage reported it, was undoubtedly an adaptation of the motto, ‘Am I not a Woman and a Sister?’ ” (76). Truth never spoke these words in her 1851 speech at the Women’s Rights Convention. Both Mabee and Painter have documented the discrepancies between Gage’s account, published in 1863 twelve years later, and four surviving 1851 transcriptions recorded in local and national newspapers. None of the contemporaneous accounts include any
form of “Ar’n’t I a Woman?”—the closest rendition is in the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, which reported that “Truth, after saying that she had ‘plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed,’ merely asked, ‘Can any man do more than that?’” (Mabee 76). For American readers, Gage’s stylized repetitions of “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” served to rhetorically link Truth’s women’s rights and antislavery politics with the most famous abolitionist motto of the nineteenth century. To take Mabee’s insight a bit farther, though, the ekphrastic association between the revised motto and

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the emblem would have invited readers to imagine Truth’s body as akin to that of the kneeling slave supplicant in exactly the same way as she glosses the pose of the *Libyan Sibyl* earlier in the article, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

Gage’s verbal portrait of Truth as the slave supplicant via the Ar’n’t I a Woman? motto also encodes the stereotype of the grief-stricken slave mother, another portrait evoking “spectatorial sympathy” which was repeatedly represented in abolitionist printed materials using a variation on the SEAST emblem. The visual paradigm of the kneeling slave occurs in numerous scenes of maternal separation in abolitionist literature, including an engraving from the 1849 *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, and American Slave, Written by Himself*, subtitled “Can a Mother Forget her Suckling Child?”, which shows the kneeling mother stretching out her hands to a slaver holding her baby just out of her reach [Figure 3.11]. In this example, the suffering mother is reduced to the icon of the kneeling supplicant: the body is stripped of its particularized characteristics to become a disembodied icon claiming to represent the real “truth” of the horrors of slavery.

An ekphrastic literary reference to the emblem of the slave supplicant is also evident in the African American author Frances E. W. Harper’s 1854 poem “The Slave Mother,” which depicts a mother’s final farewell to a child taken from her to be sold:

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother, pale with fear,
   Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
   His trembling form to hide. (ll. 5-16)\textsuperscript{25}

From the slave mother’s “clasped” hands to her “imploring eye,” the visual cues are reminiscent of the SEAST emblem and its iconographic adaptations, here with the added figure of the child clinging to her skirts and later torn “from her circling arms.”

\textsuperscript{25} Harper’s “The Slave Mother” was published in her chapbook \textit{Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects} (1854) and reprinted in successive editions. In “Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry,” Meredith L. McGill argues that it is one among several of Harper’s poems that “depend heavily on stock figures (‘The Slave Mother,’ ‘The Drunkard’s Child,’ ‘The Dying Christian,’ ‘The Dying Fugitive’)” (63) and that it “becomes a vehicle for making available…common reactions and stock postures for readers to inhabit” (66). No critic, as far as I know, has linked the poem to the SEAST emblem.
But in this verbal ekphrasis, Harper has room to expand beyond the reductive iconicity of the emblem and re-inscribe bodily particularity and emotional suffering back into her representation of the slave mother. As if to prove Quintilian’s maxim that words say more than the “mute image,” Harper re-animates the ekphrastic tableau with the mother’s “shuddering” and the boy’s “trembling” forms while underscoring the emotional pain of the mother in the details of the “sadly clasped” hands to the “storm of agony…sweeping through the brain.”

Both Harriet Beecher Stowe’s and Frances Dana Gage’s articles go out of their way to link Sojourner Truth’s body to familiar visual referents. Stowe’s ekphrastic description of Truth as The Libyan Sibyl changed the optics for representing slavery and Emancipation using the female body, shifting away from the spectacle of suffering and black supplication offered by the SEAST emblem and positioning Truth as a source of oracular knowledge for the nation. Even in this shift, however, Stowe’s sculptural paradigm continued to objectify and commoditize Truth’s body as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, especially with respect to visual scrutiny as in the debates over sculptural representations of “race.” Like Harper does with the body of the slave mother, Truth re-narrates her bodily significations in the context of nineteenth century abolitionism’s “ocularcentric ethos” using Stowe’s verbal portrait as a touchstone for her own self-representations.

The critical models of the “ekphrastic self-portrait” and “spectacular opacity” presented separately by Blackwood and Daphne Brooks in the context of African American women’s written and performative negotiations of self are crucial
interlocutors here (Blackwood 107; Brooks 8). Each critic shows how nineteenth-century black women refugured their bodies by interposing their own verbal narratives as disruptions of the status quo and as lenses through which their bodies must be viewed. For example, as Blackwood shows, Harriet Jacobs rewrote her real-life runaway slave notice penned by James Norcom in her 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in such a way as to inscribe bodily particularity and selfhood back into this alienating genre. Whereas Norcom’s notice reduces Jacobs to a racial “type,” a “‘light mulatto…of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a covering of black hair that curls naturally but which can be easily combed straight,’” Jacobs’s re-writing prioritizes Brent’s intellect and adds the personalized detail, “‘Has a decayed spot on a front tooth’ *(I, 97)*” (qtd. in Blackwood 107-108). Intentionally “contrasting the [typographic] stock figures used to illustrate fugitive slave notices,” Jacobs re-narrates her body’s visual significations by foregrounding the particularity of this detail as “a visual reminder of malnourishment and bodily neglect” (Blackwood 109). Jacobs’s revised fugitive notice models just one way in which the stripping of the individual body to a racialized “type” could be disrupted or revised by its subject.

An incredibly powerful moment in Truth’s oratorical repertoire, her disrobing of her breast in front of a crowd of hecklers, is akin to the ekphrastic qualities of Jacobs’s re-written fugitive notice. Truth’s action, which took place in northern Indiana in 1858, was in response to a demand by a proslavery Democrat, Dr. T. W. Strain that she “show her breast to some of the ladies present” to allay his and other audience members’ “doubts” over whether Truth was a man or a woman (qtd. in
Mabee 188). Reported in a letter to the editor by William Hayward published in the *Northern Indianian* on October 4, Truth’s response to Strain’s degrading comment is best documented at length:

Sojourner rising in all the dignity of womanhood…demanded why they suspected her “to be a man?” and was answered, “your voice is not the voice of a woman; it is the voice of a man.”

Sojourner told them that her “breasts had suckled many a white babe; that some of those babies had grown to man’s estate, and that they were far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be.”

In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame but to their shame, that she uncovered her breast before them. Two young men, viz.: A. Badgely and J. Hamer voluntarily stepped forward to the examination. As Sojourner disrobed her bosom, she quietly asked them if they too “wished to suck.” (qtd. in Mabee 188-89)

Truth’s decision to expose her breast challenged Strain’s implicit assumption of social power over Truth by demonstrating by word and action that it was him, and not her, who should feel “shame” because of his affront to public morals and human decency. She could have ignored his remarks, but in discrediting them so spectacularly she infantilized Strain and his supporters and positioned herself in the role of metaphorical mother whose breasts had once nourished men “far more manly” than they.

In this moment, juxtaposing verbal narration of the history of her own breast with bodily gesture, Truth figures herself as a kind of mother of the nation, suckling white babies as well as her own biological children. Painter points out that Truth is at great risk in this moment of falling into one of two stereotypes, the oversexualized

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26 An edited version of this letter appeared in the Boston *Liberator* on October 15, 1858, where it reached a wider circulation.
Jezebel or the submissive, desexualized mammy, but that her rhetorical skill saves her from either (140-141). Brooks’s analysis uses the generative notion of “spectacular opacity,” which she describes as a performative cultural moment that “contests[s] the ‘dominative imposition of transparency’ systematically willed on to black figures,” to help explain the success of Truth’s disassociation with either stereotype (8). In the context of a larger study of African American women’s performative acts that exhibit this quality of disruption between what is seen and what is visually or ideologically familiar, Brooks writes,

> The figures in this book experiment with ways of ‘doing’ their bodies differently in public spaces. We can think of their acts as opaque, as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and rehistoricizing of the flesh. (8)

Acts of resistance against visual coding of the body according to familiar cultural identities or stereotypes—such as the mammy, the runaway slave, or the kneeling supplicant—allow for a kind of re-narration of the body which, if expanded to the realm of writing as well as performance, could range from the individualized particularity of ekphrastic self-portraiture, as in Blackwood’s reading of Jacobs, to deliberate obfuscation, as in Brooks’s reading of Adah Isaacs Menken’s shifting performative personas.

The expansion of Brooks’s model to words as well as performance allows for the consideration of ekphrastic interdependence between the two mediums, particularly in the nineteenth-century context of mass media and the press’s continual refiguring of oratorical performance. “Spectacular opacity” can be performed in
words and texts as well as by bodies. Truth’s ekphrastic re-narration of the history of her own breast, paired with the gesture of exposing it, eclipses the scrutiny happening among the white spectators—an intentional rewriting of her bodily significations. Her gestural narrative exposes, most importantly, a history of past appropriations: “that her ‘breasts had suckled many a white babe’” under slavery. Brooks reads Truth’s act of exposing her breast as a “corporeal dissent” against cultural constructions of her body based on the power dynamics of white spectatorship: she “splinters the security of the viewer’s intimacy with her body” by conjuring up the “hidden narrative of black ‘motherhood’ rather than ‘mammyhood’” (159-160).

Brooks importantly distinguishes the realities of black motherhood from the mammy stereotype, showing how Truth disrupts the latter by “rehistoricizing” her breast in the context of slavery. But whereas Brooks is primarily interested in the bodily enactment of Truth’s dissent, I am interested in the verbal enactment of the “hidden narrative” paired with her gesture and the consequences of Truth’s rhetorical alignment with the black slave mother.

It is through Truth’s words, including her inquiry “if they too ‘wished to suck,’” that her exposure of her breast becomes an act of defiance rather than capitulation. She fundamentally alters the visual icons popularly associated with the idea of the “slave mother” by replacing the familiar pose of the mother as supplicant—borrowed from the SEAST emblem and replicated in poems from Harper’s “The Slave Mother” to engravings such as the one accompanying Henry Bibb’s narrative, as discussed above—with the image of the black slave mother with
her breast out, offering it scornfully to white slaveholding citizens as a symbol of appropriated nourishment akin to and contiguous with appropriated slave labor. But the *Liberator'*s paraphrased reprinting of Hayward’s letter to the editor of the *Northern Indianian* adds a key phrase that further accentuates Truth’s implied message, reporting that Truth said “her breasts had suckled many a white babe, *to the exclusion of her own offspring*” (qtd. in Painter 139, emphasis mine). The *Liberator*’s added emphasis on Truth’s mothering of both white and black children with her specifically “colored breasts” underscores the abolitionist press’s role in accentuating Truth’s rhetorical self-positioning as a maternal figure for all the nation’s children. As Painter points out, since “[w]et nursing by slaves was far more prevalent in the plantation South than Dutch New York,” Truth’s remarks “evoked her symbolic history as a slave mother rather than her own actual experience” (141). By referring to this national history with a narrative gesture inscribed on her own particular body, Truth figures herself as an example of the black slave mother whose body and generative power has been appropriated, and she figures the black slave mother (and so herself) as the metaphorical and literal mother of the nation.

At its deepest level, this second figuration was the most unsettling for white audiences for whom the specter of miscegenation cut across every social issue. The slave mother as national mother was decidedly not the stereotypical “mammy,” whose social position was understood as submissive and nonthreatening, and whose maternal relation to white children was as wet-nurse and caretaker, not as sexually generative biological mother. Because of her allusions to multi-racial motherhood
and her moral chastisement of Strain and his supporters, I read Truth as symbolically claiming for herself—and so for the black slave mother—the joint role of “national mother” and moral compass, which was traditionally embodied (and continued to be through to the end of the nineteenth century) by the allegorical figure of Columbia. The remainder of this chapter will show how the convergent figurations of Truth’s representation of herself as national mother, the nation’s representations of Columbia, and Stowe’s representation of Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl,” come to a head in the political and social pandemonium of the Civil War and predictions of Emancipation.

A classicized national icon who took her place alongside her British analogue, Britannia, and whose visual associations often blended with that of Liberty, Columbia represented the American nation in an age of post-Revolutionary independence and increasing nationalism. Whereas Liberty, as a modern adaptation of the classical Roman goddess Libertas, traveled to America by way of the iconography and spirit of the French Revolution, Columbia first appeared in eighteenth-century discourse as a classicized toponym for the continent “discovered” by Columbus. Her allegorical body came to be represented in a neoclassical fashion similar to that of Liberty. By the nineteenth century, the two figures had commingled significantly, especially in their visual representations, as the United States self-identified as a republic modeled on principles of liberty and democracy. As Wood notes, the iconographic blending between Columbia and Liberty “symbolically merg[ed] the abstract theory of Freedom with the politically concrete symbols of national identity” (Horrible Gift of Freedom, 40). Columbia’s particular symbolic role was as mother of the nation and
moral compass. The rhetoric and iconography of Columbia was deployed in poetry, periodicals, and political nationalist discourse as a model to post-Revolutionary white American mothers, characterized as “Daughters of Columbia,” whose primary social role was to assist in the moral upbringing of the next generation of male citizens. As William Smith exclaimed on July 4, 1796, “These, ye lovely daughters of Columbia, are amongst your patriotic duties! …To delight, to civilize, and to ameliorate mankind!” (qtd. in Winterer 68). In a later visual analogue, an 1865 lithographic print entitled “Columbia’s Noblest Sons,” shows Columbia, figured at the head of a family tree, “turn[ing] George Washington and Abraham Lincoln into contemporary children of the national family” by crowning them with laurel wreaths, incorporating the two key figures of American Revolution and Emancipation into a divine genealogy of national liberty (Samuels 13) [Figure 3.12].

The iconographic usefulness of the neoclassical female body in nineteenth-century U.S. culture was particularly related to gender. As Powers’s Greek Slave exemplified earlier in this chapter, discourses of public morals could be mapped onto a female icon in a way that implicitly policed real female (and male) bodies by curtailing immodesty and lasciviousness in the name of feminine virtue. Shirley Samuels describes the symbolic usefulness of Columbia in a number of prints and cartoons circulating during the Civil War as an analogous visual rhetoric of national “housekeeping” that regulated domestic and racial relations (44). In an allegorical

27 Winterer points out that “female classical icons like Liberty, Columbia, and Minerva” are “reminders of the paradox of how the classicized female form could represent the republican body politic even as flesh-and-blood women continued to be denied the right to vote or hold office” (9).
1861 cartoon by Thomas W. Strong entitled “South Carolina Topsey [sic] in a Fix,” a seated Columbia scolds Topsy, a young slave character from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), “for ‘picking stars out’ of the nation’s flag,” an allocation of blame for the fractured Union (Samuels 43) [Figure 3.13]. Columbia, accompanied by her other iconic emblems, the eagle and the liberty cap, is shown stitching the stars back in place, correcting the rupture of Secession, while Topsy, repeating the words of Stowe’s character as she stands powerless before the scolding, “can only answer ‘cause I’s so wicked’ about a scenario in which she has no opportunity to have a national voice” (Samuels 43-44). Here the affront to the female national icon, Columbia, in the form of Topsy’s unraveling of her sewing, becomes
the “evidence” for displacing the blame for Secession onto the bodies of “misbehaving” slaves.

Truth’s gestural narrative of national motherhood in the baring of her breast particularizes the iconographic usefulness of the neoclassical female body in the public management of race, gender, and public morals. Like Columbia telling off Topsy, but this time in a radical reversal of approved racial relations, Truth scolds Strain and his supporters for their affront to the national body of the metaphorical black mother. Again and again reports of Truth’s most iconic speeches depict similar moments of her calming a riotous crowd, correcting moral waywardness, and offering sound advice. Rather than deploying her “housekeeping” skills to police racial hierarchies or other socially constructed identity categories, Truth’s national role is
her reprioritization of peaceful relations and care of all the nation’s peoples. For example, when she famously asked Frederick Douglass “Is God gone?” she immediately calmed the atmosphere in an 1852 abolitionist meeting that had become invested in rhetoric supporting violent rather than peaceful action. As the journalist Oliver Johnson reported in the *Pennsylvania Freeman*,

> Mr. Douglass, in the course of his speech, took occasion to glorify Violence as in some circumstances far more potent than Moral Suasion. . . . When his argument on this point had reached its climax, and the audience had been wrought to a high pitch of excitement by his rhetoric—in answer to his exclamation, “What is the use of Moral Suasion to a people thus trampled in the dust?” was heard the voice of Sojourner Truth, who asked, with startling effect, “Is God gone?” . . . It was indeed sublime to see the plausible sophistry of Mr. Douglass rendered powerless by a simple question from the mouth of an illiterate woman. (qtd. in Mabee 88)

This much-repeated example of Truth taking Douglass to task for straying away from peaceful Christian morals—even in his support of the antislavery cause that she, too, passionately supports—highlights yet again Truth’s self-appointed role as public moral compass and peacekeeper, a calling exemplified by her many years of itinerant preaching and public speaking.

Another exemplary moment early in Truth’s decades-long career of public speaking is her calming of a rowdy mob that had descended on a camp meeting during her time at Northampton, Massachusetts, circa 1844-1845. Truth’s *Narrative* records her actions in detail, showing how she overcame personal fear for her own safety as “the only colored person here…on [whom], probably, their wicked mischief will fall first,” in order to preserve an atmosphere of peaceful worship (*Narrative* 94). Inspired by the scriptural teaching “One shall chase a thousand, and two put ten
thousand to flight,” Truth goes out from her tent and begins to sing hymns to the crowd, distracting them from disorderly behavior. Like a mother putting the troublemakers to bed, she urges them to disperse:

“Children, I have talked and sung to you, as you asked me; and now I have a request to make of you; will you grant it?” “Yes, yes, yes,” resounded from every quarter. “Well, it is this,” she answered; “if I will sing one more hymn for you, will you then go away, and leave us this night in peace?” (Narrative 96)

Truth repeats her question a second and third time, urging them all to add their assenting voices, finally procuring a collective promise:

This time a long, loud “Yes–yes–yes,” came up, as from the multitudinous mouth of the entire mob. “AMEN! it is SEALED,” repeated Sojourner, in the deepest and most solemn tones of her powerful and sonorous voice. Its effect ran through the multitude, like an electric shock; and the most of them considered themselves bound by their promise, as they might have failed to do under less imposing circumstances. (Narrative 96-97)

It is no wonder that Truth’s power as an orator was linked especially to her voice through the trope of the sibyl and through countless reports that referred to the effects of her voice as “electric”: here Truth’s maternal singing voice lulls the mob into obedience and her spoken affirmation of their promise acts as a magically or spiritually binding “seal” that cannot be broken. The resonances with the classical mythology of prophetic speech are unmistakable: not only is Truth shown here as a kind of modern-day Orpheus charming the mob by the power of her voice alone, but her influence transforms their voices into a “multitudinous mouth” echoing the “hundred mouths [ostia centum]” of the cave of Vergil’s Cumaean sibyl, “from which
rush just as many voices” (*Aeneid* 6.43-44). Here Truth’s call and response rhetorical strategy joins their voices to hers, enacting both the binding seal of the sibyl and the maternal amelioration of Columbia.

Supporting Truth’s belief in her role as peacekeeper in varying contexts from the rowdy camp meeting to the abolitionist lecture is her rhetoric of national embodiment, which echoes the iconographic signifiers of “Columbia,” the woman as nation. What I am calling Truth’s national embodiment can be seen not only in her ekphrastic “rehistoricizing” of her body as exemplified by the breast-baring incident in her 1858 Indiana speech, but also in a number of other repeated phrases in which she figures her body as directly akin to the nation itself, or as specially able to relate to the nation and its peoples via perceptual acuity. Such moments, especially those that occur after Stowe’s “Libyan Sibyl” article, reflect Truth’s conscious positioning of herself as a citizen and leader of the United States, not as an exoticized African transplant as Stowe would have it. Her rhetoric of national embodiment, therefore, becomes a way of claiming American-ness as well as leadership qualities.

The first record of such a moment appears in her *Narrative* when she recalls her fight to ensure the safe return of her enslaved son to New York after he had been illegally sold to the South. She tells her former mistress, Sally Dumont, “I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I’ll have my child again” (*Narrative* 31). As Truth’s amanuensis Olive Gilbert records, “These words were pronounced in the most slow, solemn, and determined measure and manner. And in

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speaking of it, she says, ‘Oh my God! I know’d I’d have him agin. I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so tall within—I felt as if the power of a nation was with me!’” (Narrative 31). This moment of embodied empowerment coincides with Truth’s memory of a time when, against the odds, she successfully employed legal measures to recover her enslaved son from an abusive and illegal sale. Her perception of her own strength is figured in a simile of national sponsorship in which the nation’s laws become embodied in Truth’s own physical stature—“I felt so tall within.”

An important aspect of Truth’s national embodiment as I am describing it is related to her own and others’ representations of her age. The trope that emerged—in anticipation of the upcoming 1876 Centennial celebration—was that Sojourner Truth was a “twin” of the American century, born in 1776. The comparison between Truth and the “century” provided a metaphorical answer to speculation about Truth’s age circulating in newspapers in the wake of Stowe’s comparison of her to a “sibyl,” since classical sibyls were believed to be of very advanced age. Truth’s own uncertainty about her birth date, an uncertainty shared by many former slaves, corroborated the comparison. As Painter notes, when she died on November 26, 1883, “Everyone, herself included, thought she was at least one hundred and five years old. She was actually about eighty-six,” having been born in 1797 (254).

In the ancient Greco-Roman context, exaggerations of advanced age boosted the credibility and iconicity of the sibyl: “the prophetess who claimed an early origin for herself could also demonstrate her infallibility by foretelling events which the
reader could recognise behind a thin cloak of obscurity as part of the known traditions of his nation’s past” (Parke 8). For Truth, too, the notion of being as old as the American century served to establish her as a prominent figure in the nation’s history, and in a particularly embodied manner: if her birth dated back to the nation’s origins, she could serve as a vehicle of and for national memory. As Frances Titus writes in the 1878 edition of Truth’s *Narrative and “Book of Life,”* “She stands by the closing century like a twin sister. Born and reared by its side, what it knows she knows, what it has seen she has seen. Her memory is a vast storehouse of knowledge, the shelves of which contain a history of the revolutions, progressions, and culmination of the great ideas which have been a part of her life purpose” (253). Titus further characterizes Truth’s record of antislavery and antiracist activism as directly contributing to recent national “progressions” such as Emancipation. In this she becomes a version of the national body that extends into the present as well as the past: “She continues to keep guard over the rights of her race, to the interests of which she has so long been devoted” (*Narrative and “Book of Life”* 253).

The comparison between Truth and the American century was popularized by Titus in 1878, but the idea of Truth’s age corresponding to that of the century shows up well before that, for example in an 1871 *Milwaukee Sentinel* article that stated that “The strong-minded colored woman, Sojourner Truth, is active and vigorous as she was twenty years ago, though not far from a centenarian” (“Personal”). A reprinted report in the *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* from the same year provides evidence that during this pre-Centennial period, as in later news reports from the late 70s and
early 80s, her age was often the only detail mentioned: “Sojourner Truth writes to the National[!] Standard, concerning her New tour to get petitions sent to Congress to grant lands to the freed people: ‘I have been hoping somebody would print a little of what I am doing, but the papers seem to be content simply in saying how old I am’” (“All Sorts and Sizes”). Titus’s framing of the 1878 edition solidified the trend while advancing a more embodied comparison. In 1876 illness prevented Truth from attending the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, where she had hoped to sell copies of the new edition of her Narrative. Her absence, coupled with her illness, likely spurred the erroneous reports of her death that began circulating that year. Titus confirms their falsity while strategically exploiting the Centennial connection: “In the autumn of 1876, a report of her decease was widely circulated. How this occurred we know not. Possibly, because her twin sister, the Century, had just expired. No prayers addressed, or oblations poured out to the gods, could induce them to grant it an extra hour. But Sojourner grandly outrode the storm which wrecked the Century” (Narrative and “Book of Life” vi). Titus’s rhetorical strategy suggests that, compared with the “expired” body of her “twin sister, the Century,” Truth provides an enduring national body for post-1876 America.

Amidst all these reports, Truth often wished that attention could be redirected to her works rather than her age, as suggested by the quote above. However, she also benefited from the iconicity conferred on her by the reports of her advanced age and particularly her age as compared to the American century or the sibyl, and she did not ignore this fact in her own speeches. In an 1881 speech at Union Park Hall, Truth
drew on the rhetoric of comparison between her body and that of the U.S. nation in a way that further linked her authority as a public leader to her advanced age. As reported in the Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean,

The old lady commenced her lecture by saying that she wondered why she had staid [sic] in this world so long. Everything worth mentioning had come into the world since she had. OLDER THAN THE GOVERNMENT. She was older than this government, and older than all machinery and patents and liberty. But she believed God had given her strength and life to have her come before the people and relate the things He had allowed her to see, so that that [sic] they might better appreciate His wonderful goodness. (“Sojourner Truth The Old Lady Gave One of Her Instructive Informal Talks Last Night”)

Here Truth re-narrates the trope of her age as not just “twin” of the Century, but “older than the government” and older than “liberty” itself. Whether by the latter she refers solely to Emancipation or also to the allegorical figure of Liberty in connection with the American Revolution is unclear. However, through this rhetorical re-positioning of “older than…”, she figures herself not as a copy or analogue of the national allegorical body, but rather as the original. By beginning with a question as to the reason for her longevity and ending with the supplied answer “to have her come before the people and relate the things He [God] had allowed her to see,” Truth suggests that her special capacity for embodying national memory corresponds to her life’s goal and God-given task of sharing her knowledge and spiritual guidance with the American people, black and white.

Truth’s sense of responsibility for and particular knowledge of the nation’s peoples emerges also in a metaphor of “reading” via embodied perceptual acuity that Truth repeats several different occasions using the formula “I can’t read, but...”. As Mabee argues, “In a sense she molded her public image around her illiteracy, using it
to dramatize herself and shape her life, turning her illiteracy from a handicap into a significant element of her charm” (65). This rhetorical move is evident in the following examples in which Truth expands “reading” into a trope of perceptive knowledge rather than book learning. A transcription of Truth’s speech at the 1871 Commemoration of the Eighth Anniversary of Negro Freedom in the United States printed in the *Boston Post* shows Truth making a joke out of the noisy departure of one of the audience members, using the disruption to speak about ethical responsibility: “‘Whoever is agoin’ let him go. When you tell about work here, den you have to scud. [Laughter and applause.] I tell you I can’t read a book, but I can read de people. [Applause.]” (*Narrative and “Book of Life”* 216). Here Truth “reads” the audience member’s character as it is reflected in his departure, suggesting to the remaining auditors that she can read them too, and they had better stick around to sign her petition and continue the work she is advocating.

Another example of this trope suggests an expanded rhetorical usefulness in the realm of politics, specifically in the debate over whether literacy should be a voting qualification. In an 1867 letter to the *New York World*, Stanton quotes Truth as denouncing a literacy qualification by demonstrating how book learning is irrelevant to her own practical cultural literacy: “You know, children, I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations. I can see through a millstone, though I can’t see through a spelling-book. What a narrow idea a reading qualification is for a voter! I know and do what is right better than many big men who read” (qtd. in Painter 230). Here, in a thematic prefiguring of the 1871 quote
cited above, Truth explicitly contrasts practical knowledge with the reading of “such small stuff as letters.” The second sentence weighing the benefits of “see[ing] through” a millstone versus a spelling-book is a particularly potent example. The “eye” of a millstone is the hole in the middle of the runner stone through which the grain is poured. It funnels the grain in between the runner and bed stone to be ground into flour. Since the responsible operator of the mill will frequently look down into the eye to check that the grain is flowing properly, Truth’s statement that she can “see through a millstone” indicates that she knows how to properly monitor the equipment in order to produce good quality flour. Like a politician who understands the nation and its peoples, she understands the mill’s inner workings. Her reading of the millstone, furthermore, supports the literal nourishment of the country, while reading a spelling book cannot.

Truth’s visual metaphor of reading as “see[ing] through” something is borrowed from the mechanics of the stone mill, but it is also reminiscent of a camera, which the operator also looks through in order to frame the shot. In both of the latter technologies, visual monitoring assists the conversion of an original substance into a product—grain into flour, and light into a photographic negative. Truth’s unusual phrasing in saying that she “can't see through a spelling-book” aligns reading as a similar visual operation: the reader looks into a contraption whose processes are obscure to the novice, and by looking is able to understand and manipulate its workings. I point out this three-fold resemblance between the mill, the camera, and the book because it highlights Truth’s understanding of the literal role of the visual in
the act of reading as well as the ekphrastic “pictures” appearing in one’s mind as a result of that act. Throughout this chapter I have shown how Truth was acutely aware of the press’s role in promoting and circulating the “Libyan Sibyl” verbal portrait of her and how it influenced the way audiences viewed her body. For Truth, the text is not a magical “talking book” as in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s famous trope, but rather a functional tool that, like speech, encodes the visual as well as the verbal.

Blackwood’s analysis of the extension of photographic principles into literary rhetoric models a way to read Truth’s response to Stowe’s portrait of her as the “Libyan Sibyl” in her orally performed rhetoric of national embodiment. In this Truth demonstrates a conscious awareness of the way that print’s mediation of visual culture influenced the way audiences would understand ekphrastic refigurations of the body in oral speech. “Reading” in the two quotes above echoes the popular understanding of the “sibyl” as a prophetess with the nation’s best interests at heart—for example the Cumaean sibyl who allegedly brought the Sibylline books to Tarquinius and whom Wendell Phillips cites in his abolitionist speeches, and, of course, Stowe’s gloss on Truth as the “Libyan Sibyl” as a prophetess of Emancipation. In saying, “I can read de people” and “I read men and nations,” Truth uses the idea of sibylline knowledge to reinforce audiences’ belief in her leadership qualities.

A brief detour to discuss the tension between the oral and the written embedded in the figure of the sibyl is in order, because this same tension is at stake in both nineteenth-century discourse and current scholarship about Sojourner Truth and
her illiteracy. That ancient Greek oracular predictions were famous for having been delivered orally by an inspired, frenzied prophetess seems counterintuitive to the fact that they were collected and circulated in written form. However, as Michael Attyah Flower explains, the tension can be explained by a fundamental shift in Greek culture in the fourth century BCE, during which the rise of written culture displaces oral composition, disrupting the ability of sibyls to compose oracular verses spontaneously (221). Thus the oracles in written form memorialized and celebrated a lost form of oral composition at the same time as they were attributed to divine inspiration. Prior to this shift, oracular utterances were noted down in exact detail by the person consulting the oracle, and they were both held on-site as official records and transmitted orally by professional reciters and interpreters, the chresmologoi (Flower 65). Later they would be collected into scrolls intended for wider circulation and individual interpretation. Flower provides substantial evidence to corroborate the authenticity of the Delphic oracles as composed by the Pythia, refuting suggestions proposed by earlier scholars that a male poet or priest must have rendered them into verse. Reproducing an oracle quoted by Herodotus 40-50 years after its delivery, Flower observes, “the thought is disjointed, the syntax obscure, the meter rough, and the vocabulary both simple and repetitious. If these are not the precise words of the Pythia in 481 B.C., then they are a superb imitation of what a genuinely ecstatic woman would have uttered” (236).

The encoding of a lost form of oral composition in the circulating scrolls explains why the figure of the sibyl in ancient Greco-Roman culture encapsulates the
seemingly disparate tropes of frenzied speech and written scroll. To nineteenth-century Americans, the “sibyl” figure seemed to fit Sojourner Truth so well because her illiteracy aligned her with the enigmatic oracles of ancient Greece whose utterances were considered divinely inspired precisely because of their “disjointed” or “rough” qualities and oral delivery. Nevertheless, as Flower points out in the case of the Delphic oracle, “The claim that the Pythia had no specialized training and was just any old peasant woman off the farm (so to speak) is a rhetorical strategy meant to underscore the fact that it was Apollo, and not human art, that was the source of oracular responses” (231). The fact that oracular women did undergo prior poetic training (which was also no doubt supplemented by an altered or ecstatic mental state during oracular consultations) adds another layer of mediation even to ancient Greeks’ belief in the “purity” of divine inspiration in oracular recitation. Truth’s illiteracy has been similarly figured as proof of her “natural” religious fervor (Stowe) or as proof of unmediated “authenticity.” In regard to both ancient Greek oracles and nineteenth-century African American oral culture, I will restate what I have said before: illiteracy is not coextensive with or proof of unmediated orality.

Practical knowledge of the nation and its peoples that Truth figures in the rhetoric of “reading” as an echo of sibylline knowledge (“I can read de people”) was a quality that Americans also assigned to the figure of Columbia as the protector of the nation, particularly during the year leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. In a cartoon by Winslow Homer published in Harper’s Weekly on April 13, 1861, the day after the firing on Fort Sumter officially began the war, the figure of
Columbia is shown handing a document to Abraham Lincoln labeled “Constitution Amended” while a discarded document labeled “Chicago Platform” languishes on his fallen top hat [Figure 3.14]. In a clear symbolic association between the figure of Columbia and the classical sibyl, the cartoon is titled “Consulting the Oracle.” Columbia is shown seated with all the accoutrements of the joint visual iconography of Liberty and Columbia, including a liberty cap on a staff, a headdress reading “Liberty,” a dress fitted out with the stars of the national flag, and an eagle. The document she is handing to Lincoln is a visual echo of the scroll held by Story’s Libyan Sibyl and the written records of sibylline prophecy. In this widely-circulated Harper’s Weekly cartoon, the figures and visual iconography of the classical sibyl, Columbia, and Liberty all collapse into one, and the point of intersection is the social and political turmoil over the pressing questions of Civil War and Emancipation.

The labeled scrolls and dialogue in the cartoon provide the best clues as to the exact intent behind Homer’s depiction of Columbia as the national “oracle” giving advice to Lincoln. On this day immediately following the crisis at Fort Sumter, the reader seeing the words “Constitution Amended” on the scroll handed to Lincoln, as well as the fallen “Chicago Platform,” would likely have made the connection to the rhetoric of nonaggression against individual states from the 1860 Republican platform that got Lincoln elected.\(^{29}\) In the lead-up to April 12, 1861, both the Confederate

\(^{29}\) The fourth statement in the 1860 Republican platform, under a header depicting Columbia, reads, “That the maintenance inviolate of the Rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depends; and we denounce
government and Lincoln took pains to avoid initiating a conflict. However, Lincoln disregarded the demands of South Carolina for Union forces to withdraw from Fort Sumter, and once the unofficial siege on the fort hastened the dwindling of his force’s supplies, he acted by sending supply ships the fort with provisions. It is unclear whether Homer is depicting Lincoln’s consultation of the sibylline Columbia as a response to the crisis or the deciding factor in Lincoln’s previous actions. In the dialogue, Lincoln asks “And, what next?” and Columbia responds, “First, be sure you’re right, then go ahead!” Either way, Columbia as the national oracle, in handing Lincoln the written permission of the “amended” Constitution, authorizes his actions.

the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter under what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes” (Press & Tribune Office, Chicago, IL).
Because Lincoln’s military engagement in the Civil War did not require an official Constitutional Amendment, it is not a stretch to suppose that the scroll Columbia hands to him might prefigure later changes that Northerners like Homer suspected would result from the war: for example, the Thirteenth Amendment that Lincoln is now famous for setting in motion with his 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. If so, and if this is how Stowe might have read it, we can also see an early trace—in this iconic image of Columbia as oracle—of Truth as the Libyan Sibyl predicting Emancipation.

As discussed above, Truth was already cultivating an implicit association with Columbia in her ekphrastic rhetoric of national embodiment that countered the iconography of the supplicant slave mother and revised the cultural resonance of the “Libyan Sibyl.” A more literal visual association with the figures of Columbia and Liberty also precedes Stowe’s 1863 article, this time in the form of Truth’s lecturing outfit. In June 1861, Truth visited Angola, Indiana with her white companion Josephine Griffing to give a series of abolitionist speeches, risking seizure of her person due to the state’s Black Laws forbidding the entry of African Americans into the state. Because of hostile mobs and threats by Democrats that they would burn the building in which she was appointed to speak, the Union home guard took Truth into their protection, at one point going so far as to arrest her and bring her to a mock trial to prevent a life-threatening arrest by a “rebel constable” (Washington 294-95).

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30 As Margaret Washington notes, Titus mistakes the date of Truth’s visit to Angola as 1862 in the “Book of Life,” but articles in the Liberator as well as the Steuben (IN) Republican confirm the June 1861 dates (443, note 50).
Quoted by Titus in her “Book of Life,” Truth recalls in detail the apparel that her companions outfitted her in before escorting her to the court-house at which she was determined to speak:

The ladies thought I should be dressed in uniform as well as the captain of the home guard, whose prisoner I was and who was to go with me to the meeting. So they put upon me a red, white, and blue shawl, a sash and apron to match, a cap on my head with a star in front, and a star on each shoulder. When I was dressed, I looked in the glass and was fairly frightened. Said I, “It seems I am going to battle.” My friends advised me to take a sword or pistol. I replied, “I carry no weapon; the Lord will reserve [preserve] me without weapons. I feel safe even in the midst of my enemies; for the truth is powerful and will prevail.” (140-41)

This spectacular ekphrastic image of Truth in a “uniform” of a red, white, and blue shawl and matching apron augmented by the military sash, cap, and epaulettes of a Union officer presents a stark contrast to the image of the “respectable, middle-class matron” that emerged later in her favorite cartes-de-visite portraits, which show her seated with familiar domestic props such as knitting and flower bouquets (Painter 187).

While critics have paid particular attention to these later domestic portraits as authentic records of Truth’s self-promoted image, at least one surviving carte de visite does show Truth “wearing the attire from her Indiana Civil War campaign” of 1861 (Washington, caption for image following page 6, Chicago History Museum) [Figure 3.15]. Because this existing photograph partially recreates the ekphrastic depiction of Truth in red, white, and blue recounted in the “Book of Life,” it is important to pay close attention to the iconography of both text and photograph. No matter what preferences Truth may have settled on later, the existence of the carte de visite...
visite showing her vibrant outfit from 1861 Indiana—minus the military accoutrements—suggests that this was a mode of self-representation she was comfortable with in the early 1860s. The photograph shows Truth wearing a plain white dress with a light polka-dotted apron and a long shawl with bold stripes, possibly in red and/or blue. She is standing, leaning on her cane, and she wears an elaborate bonnet hood in addition to the plain white head wrap that appears in her later photos. The effect of the polka-dotted apron together with the striped shawl

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31 Painter cites a letter printed in the New York National Anti-Slavery Standard on February 13, 1864 in which Truth states that the 1864 photos taken in Detroit were “much better” than those taken in Battle Creek, so she may have decided she liked the more domestic portraits better (326-327, note 5). Washington dates Truth’s signature mark on the back of the photo to 1863.
suggests the iconography of the U.S. flag, which never failed to appear in representations of Liberty and Columbia in print at this time. Even in later photographs, Truth’s choice of clothing articles with prominent stripes and polka-dots continues the theme of patriotism and national embodiment: in one undated portrait, she wears both a polka-dotted dress and a boldly striped jacket, looking very much like Columbia [Figure 3.16].³²

The moment in Angola, Indiana recounted by Truth in which she “looked in the glass and was fairly frightened” by her appearance has, I believe, more to do with the military additions to her customary dress than with the iconography of the red, white, and blue shawl that she echoes more subtly in later portrait outfits. Her reported words after seeing her reflection, “It seems I am going to battle,” and her refusal to arm herself with sword or pistol despite her companions’ insistence, points to the military accessories as the source of her discomfort. Truth’s costuming in this anecdote may have had a hint of playfulness on the part of her companions—who in a different incident led a mock trial enlivened by a march to the courthouse accompanied by “fife and drum,” cheers of “Sojourner, Free Speech, and the Union,” and “half-drunken lawyers” who couldn’t wait to head to the tavern—but it served a serious purpose (Washington 295-296). At the beginning of the Indiana trip, Truth had been surrounded by a violent and drunken proslavery mob: “she was pushed, cursed, threatened with tar and feathers, rails, and shooting and rendered unable to

³² In a different photograph in which this same striped jacket appears, Washington states that Truth is wearing “patriotic red, white, and blue” (caption for image following page 6, Community Archives of Heritage Battle Creek).
continue her speech” (Washington 294). So, while dressing up in stars and stripes and military accessories provided a spectacle that Union supporters may have laughed and cheered for, it was also a serious and calculated deterrent against molestation by proslavery mobs. In this march to the court-house, Truth was “escorted by double files of soldiers with presented arms,” and when the show of strength had scattered the rebels she joined in singing the “‘Star Spangled Banner’…amid flashing bayonets and waving banners” and then climbed the platform and “advocated free speech with more zeal than ever before, and without interruption” (Narrative and “Book of Life” 140-41). Truth’s patriotic faux-military dress serves in this example as both protection against physical harm and iconographic deployment of the visual signifiers of national embodiment.
These visual emblems of the nation which Truth cultivated in physical attire and in her ekphrastic representations of herself as akin to Columbia are picked up and repeated by others even more strongly following Stowe’s 1863 comparison of her to that other neoclassical icon, Story’s Libyan Sibyl. Titus and supporters whose letters are printed in her “Book of Life” explicitly linked Truth’s iconicity to the visual signifiers of Columbia and Liberty. These two allegorical figures were slowly being introduced into the realm of public sculpture in works such as Thomas Crawford’s 1863 bronze Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace crowning the dome of the Capitol building—now known as the Statue of Freedom—and the now-iconic Statue of Liberty designed by French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, whose torch-bearing arm was displayed at the 1876 Centennial in a fundraising effort.

In the “Book of Life,” Titus suggests that Truth felt a close “kinship” with the “ensigns of liberty” displayed at the Capitol during her time in Washington circa 1864-1867, which would have included Crawford’s new sculpture:

After the emancipation of her people, when passing the capitol buildings, she would often pause to contemplate the ensigns of liberty displayed upon them, which then admitted a new interpretation. She devoutly thanked her God that the flag proudly floating over the dome at last afforded protection to such as she, and that the stars and stripes no longer symbolized the “scars and stripes” upon the negro's back. Instinctively her soul claimed kinship with the emblematic eagle, whose glittering eye seemed to pierce the clouds, and the span of whose wings was ample to hover over four million freemen, upon whose limbs the clanking chain would drag no more. (253)

Titus’s juxtaposition between Truth’s body traversing the Capitol grounds and the national symbols of liberty including the flag and eagle again renders a kind of national embodiment as she is compared to the eagle whose “glittering eye” and
ample wingspan protects her emancipated brethren. In a telling aside, Truth is also shown as interpreting the iconography of the flag as now truly representing liberty instead of hypocritically echoing the marks of the lash on the slave’s body—a note that suggests Truth may have used this reference in speeches to supplement visual references to the flag on her person (such as her striped jacket). In Titus’s description of Truth at the Capitol, Truth’s Indiana Civil War campaign outfit is echoed in the iconography of Crawford’s *Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace*, which would have been a focal point for any visitor [Figure 3.17]. In this statue, the figure of “Freedom” is depicted as a militarized cross between the Roman goddess *Libertas* and Columbia who bears sword, shield, and helmet. Crawford originally designed his model with a liberty cap circa 1854-1855, but, affronted by the reference to emancipation, Jefferson Davis had him redesign it as a military helmet with an eagle’s head and a crest of feathers (Fischer 299). The militarized national body in Crawford’s sculpture represents a fusion of Columbia and Liberty in the Civil War era, one which Truth certainly echoed in her Indiana campaign.

At least two other references to Truth as a fusion of Columbia, Liberty, and sibyl appear in the *Book of Life*, and they echo Stowe’s sculptural paradigm of Truth as the *Libyan Sibyl* as well as Truth’s increasing national iconicity as a symbol for liberty. A note from Hannah P. Simpson, whose family Truth stayed with during her visit to Lawrence, Kansas sometime between September 1871 and February 1872, reads, “The Lord bless you, Sojourner, and may your immortal crown be studded with many stars” (*Narrative and “Book of Life”* 291). Simpson’s ekphrasis of Truth as a
kind of sculpture or visual icon with a star-studded “immortal crown” echoes an 1863 poem responding to Stowe’s article and published in the *Liberator* that commemorates Truth as “forevermore enshrined in art” with “an aureole on a living brow,” and prefigures the seven-pointed diadem of the *Statue of Liberty* (“To Sojourner Truth, the ‘Lybian Sybil’”). An 1870 letter from Olive Gilbert, Truth’s amanuensis for her 1850 *Narrative*, further exemplifies the way that Stowe’s sculptural paradigm followed Truth even when the details were forgotten. Gilbert writes, “I was much pleased with Mrs. Stowe’s enthusiasm over you. You really almost received your apotheosis from her. She proposed, I think, that you should have a statue and symbolized our American Sibyl” (*Narrative and “Book of Life”* 278). Though Gilbert is either unaware of or has forgotten Stowe’s reference to the
real sculpture of the *Libyan Sibyl*, her recollection that Stowe thought Truth “should have a statue” incorporates both Stowe’s sculptural paradigm and Truth’s own literal and figurative cultivation of visual emblems of American national embodiment.

Whether as the “American Sibyl” or the national mother in stars and stripes, Sojourner Truth’s rhetorical and performative refiguring of her own iconicity definitively replaces Stowe’s adjective “Libyan” with “American,” shedding implications of racialized exoticism and asserting her role as a citizen and leader of the nation. Truth’s engagement with visual paradigms of race and nation as they were mediated by print in a “spectatorial” culture demonstrates her resourceful circumvention of her illiteracy and the importance of cross-media exchange between oratory and print in the nineteenth century.
We would retrace,
At sight of thee, our willing steps where wind
The paths great Homer trod. Within whose mind
Wast thou a dream, O Goddess?
—Cordelia Ray, “The Venus of Milo”

On April 14, 1876, the streets of Washington, D.C., were filled with people of all races gathering to watch the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument (known today as the Emancipation Memorial), a sculpture funded by freed African Americans in honor of former president Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation [Figure 4.1]. That day, the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination, was declared a public holiday, and events included a parade “representing nearly all of the colored organizations of the city” that marched past the White House and the Capitol to the newly dedicated Lincoln Park, and a sequence of commemorative exercises, of which the highlight was an oration by Frederick Douglass (“Glory of Lincoln”). Mixed in with oratory, song, and prayer was the reading of an eighty-line commemorative ode titled “Lincoln” written, as chairman Professor John M. Langston announced, by “Miss Cordelia Ray, a young colored lady” of New York who had been “invited to contribute a poem for this occasion” (“Glory of Lincoln”). In a social context marked by mourning in the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War and their combined death tolls, and punctuated by the gradual “transcription of the sorrow songs,” Ray’s poem took its place as one of many public negotiations of death and national memory.
(Cavitch 183). Just as monuments recalled the contours of classical sculptures and ruins, commemorative poetry was a genre linked to classical oratorical expressions, a bond exemplified by printings of Ray’s “Lincoln” alongside Douglass’s oration and descriptions of the proceedings in newspapers and pamphlets.

On this occasion, Henrietta Cordelia Ray was not present to take her place among the otherwise male speakers—preferring, perhaps, to stay behind the scenes in a manner more akin to her contemporary Anna Julia Cooper than to Sojourner Truth, who always foregrounded personal presence. William E. Matthews, an African American broker whom William J. Simmons called “a leading man” of the race, read the poem in her stead (247). These were the words that rang out over Lincoln Park as he began to recite:
To-day, O martyred chief! beneath the sun
We would unveil thy form: to thee who won
The applause of nations, for thy soul sincere,
A living tribute we would offer here.
'Twas thine not worlds to conquer, but men’s hearts;
To change to balm the sting of slavery’s darts;
In lowly charity thy joy to find,
And open “gates of mercy on mankind.”
And so they come, the freed, with grateful gift,
From whose sad path the shadows thou didst lift. (ll. 1-10)¹

Ray’s verses, read by Matthews immediately following the unveiling of the statue by President Ulysses S. Grant, anticipated audience members’ interest in Thomas Ball’s design, which shows Lincoln standing as the “Great Emancipator” over a kneeling freedman with broken shackles, as well as the need for a poetic voice that could represent both national and African American memorial interests, an expansive but still specific “we.” In Ray, the audience (and future readers) found a young poet whose commemorative verses, figured as a kind of national conscience, could speak for a rising generation of free African Americans reconciling the loss of abolitionist heroes with deteriorating social conditions after the end of Radical Reconstruction.

Commemoration proved to be a defining aspect of Ray’s poetic career, not only in odes and elegies to individuals such as Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, her father Charles B. Ray, and others, but also as a tool for identifying cultural trajectories and defining the contours of racial history. Reading Ray’s work as engaged in public dialogues about race in oratory and in print opens up a richer field for study than consideration only of her published collections, Sonnets

¹ This version of the poem was printed in an April 15, 1876 article in the National Republican, titled “Glory of Lincoln.” Ray later revised it in Poems (1910).
(1893) and *Poems* (1910). Late twentieth-century critics have traditionally dismissed the genteel verses and classical allusions appearing in these collections as exhibiting “technical virtuosity” but lacking immediate racial import (Sherman “Introduction” xxi). In contrast, I align Ray’s classical adaptations as part and parcel of her commemorative mode. Like a female Ovid compiling American mythologies of grief and loss as well as of poetic inspiration, Ray juxtaposes African American literary and cultural history with classical antiquity, proclaiming black orators and writers as modern-day Greeks and Romans.

With the exception of Tracey L. Walters, to whose analysis I will turn shortly, most contemporary critics who have written more than a few lines about Ray’s work—Joan Sherman, Paula Bernat Bennett, Angela Sorby, and Amina Gautier—have considered her verses excessively formal, idealist, and resoundingly understated in regard to racial politics, especially when compared with those of abolitionist poets of a previous generation, like Frances E. W. Harper. As Ray’s modern editor Joan R. Sherman states, “Ray’s artificial landscapes, abstract musings, and cultured tributes, bereft of the vitalizing heat of personal emotions and concrete realities, remain superior examples of the polite, poetical Picturesque orthodoxies beloved by readers of her time”—“She does not versify current racial issues,” although “past struggles for freedom and equality inspire several tributes to race heroes” (*African American Poetry* 265).² Looking for evidence of engagement with racial struggles at the turn of

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² Sherman’s “Introduction” to the only complete reprinting of Ray’s *Poems*, in the Schomburg Library’s *Collected Black Women’s Poetry, Volume 3* (1988), is even more biting. Arguing that Ray’s poems show none of “her father’s militant crusading
the century such as the anti-lynching campaign, protests against segregation, and advocacy for higher education, Sherman finds Ray’s elegies for abolitionists and African American activists lacking in political relevance in the moment. In contrast, I argue that Ray’s politics of memorialization, exemplified both in her “tributes to race heroes” and in her excavations into the classical past, constitutes a very significant claim to African American intellectual freedom and collective historical consciousness.

Commemorative moments that work to advance racial equality are scattered throughout Ray’s career, from her composition of “Lincoln” in 1876 and her contribution of “In Memoriam (Frederick Douglass)” to the African American women’s paper the Woman’s Era in April 1895 (Yellin and Bond 138), to the selection of her works for inclusion in the Woman’s Building Library at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago along with only five other African American writers. This last is an honor that speaks to the legibility of her talent to the collection’s organizers and to her national prominence at the time (Gautier 57).³

Visitors to the white-columned Woman’s Building might have flipped through Ray’s spirit on behalf of the race,” Sherman suggests that Ray’s “fondness for antique diction and syntax, for personification, mythological allusions, and copious adjectives, further stiffens the wax flowers, stuffed birds, and canvas sunsets in her verse museums” (xxx).

³ “The Woman’s Building Library included books by six known African American women writers. Among the more than 7,000 volumes were Elleleanor Eldridge’s Memoirs and Elleleanor’s Second Book; Julia A. J. Foote’s A Brand Plucked from the Fire; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Moses: A Story of the Nile, Sketches of Southern Life, and Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted; Victoria Earle Matthews’s “Aunt Lindy”; H. Cordelia Ray’s Sonnets and Sketch of the Life of the Reverend Charles B. Ray (the latter coauthored with Florence T. Ray); and T. T. Purvis’s Hagar the Singing Maiden: With Other Stories and Rhymes and Abi Meredith” (Gautier 57).
There is no need to place the text here.
included tutoring in “music, mathematics and the languages,” likely including Greek and Latin, and, in one year, instructing “a class in English literature composed of teachers” which was “extensive and thoroughly enjoyed” (Lyons 173).  

Because of Ray’s educational background, classical allusions came naturally to her. Classical figures of interest to Ray range from easily identifiable mythological characters (Venus, Antigone, Echo, Niobe) and historical writers and orators (Homer, Vergil, Ovid, Cicero) to the more elusive forms of “statuesque” female Muses and ideal beauties. Angela Sorby has characterized Ray’s classical verses as the work of a “postsentimental” female poet “performing her competence by crossing into the public sphere of the classics” but distancing herself from potential discriminations through the “artifice” of classicism (23).  

Of all of Ray’s easily identifiable “classical” poems, her sonnet “Niobe” offers the most overt allusion to racial politics, and so it has been a natural focal point for critics. Paula Bernat Bennett identifies the poem’s sympathetic evocation of maternal loss as a comment on the long history in the U.S. of separation of black children from their mothers under slavery and of the forced exportation of African peoples from “Mother Africa” (199-200). Both Sorby’s and Bennett’s reading of Ray’s classicism are tied to their interest in Ray as a

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6 These details on Ray’s education and teaching come from Maritcha R. Lyons’s sketch of Ray in Hallie Q. Brown’s *Homespun Heroes* (1926), the primary source for most critics. Additionally, Kimberly Wallace Sanders writes that Ray taught at the Colored Grammar School Number One (622), and Tonya Bolden lists Ray’s graduation from the Sauvener School of Languages; neither, however, cite their sources for these details.

7 Sorby argues that “artifice is critical to the postsentimental project: it distances women writers from suffering (the source of sentimentalism) and from their own bodies (the source of sexual and, in Ray's case, racial difference)” (23).
representative African American poet in the context of the Woman’s Building Library and in nineteenth-century America.

In a more studied analysis of Ray’s engagements with ancient Greek and Roman literature and culture, Tracey L. Walters devotes a brief section in her book *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers From Wheatley to Morrison* (2007), to two poems that adapt classical mythological themes, “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint.” Citing the speeches and writings of Ray’s contemporaries Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper as analogous political efforts, she suggests that “Ray uses the classics to redefine the image of women in literature and highlight [and contest] the voiceless and oppressed status of Black women in literature and society” (52). Unlike Sherman, Gautier, Sorby, and Bennett, Walters reads Ray’s classicism itself as a form of political engagement, rather than as an “artifice” or incidental byproduct of her training. Following Walters, my analysis takes Ray’s classical references as authentic, yet purposeful expressions of cultural literacy that engage in contemporaneous political and racial issues. I argue that Ray positions classical artifacts, ruins, and mythologies as sites of cultural memory and loss with particular resonance for African Americans.

While Walters focuses on the theme of “voice” in the mythological stories of Echo and Niobe as a broad metaphor for the cultural silencing of black women, my analysis considers Ray’s poetry within a more capacious framework of the nineteenth-century “culture of classicism,” beginning with the theme of remembering the classical past through excavated or recovered objects (especially sculptures), and
ending with a focus on remembered voices—classical and modern—as embedded flashbacks in Ray’s commemoratory verses. Calling up markers of vocal eloquence—such as Douglass’s oratory or the singing of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Malindy”—that exceed their print contexts, Ray intermingles voices of classical orators, authors, and mythological figures with those of nineteenth-century African Americans to construct cultural memory and African American literary canonicity. Walters names six of Ray’s poems as “reflect[ing] an obvious classical influence,” including “The Venus of Milo,” “Listening Nydia,” “Niobe,” and “Echo’s Complaint” (Walters 51-52). 8 To these I add Ray’s commemorative poems, especially “Lincoln: Written for the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,” “In Memoriam (Frederick Douglass),” and “In Memoriam, Paul Laurence Dunbar,” and other poems with classical allusions such as “Invocation to the Muse.” Taken together, Ray’s classical allusions and commemorative poems function as community-building tools that frame African Americans as rightful and equal inheritors of the literature and culture of classical antiquity. Because commemorative poetry as a public genre was inextricably engaged with oratory and caught up within its classical trajectory, this chapter argues that oratorical and vocal echoes within Ray’s poetry at this transitional moment had a decisive influence on the trajectory of African-American literature and poetics in the twentieth century.

8 Walters also names Ray’s poems “Antigone and Oedipus” and “The Quest of the Ideal,” which I do not have space to examine in this chapter. “Antigone and Oedipus” is the richer of these two poems in terms of classical-African American comparisons because of its meditation on exile, and certainly deserves attention.
Any study of classical receptions necessarily attends to the cultural work of remembering or reexamining the past in the present, but it is the consolidation of identities and collectivities resulting from this work—its inclusions and its exclusions—that takes center stage in Ray’s commemorative mode. Memory, including culturally constructed memory, and historical consciousness are powerful tools for producing a sense of shared experience and present and future purpose. The contested claims to the artistic and cultural legacies of the ancient past—Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Ethiopian—among nineteenth-century Americans positioned recovered artifacts and cultural histories as exportable commodities used to justify or contest present racial and identity formations. Many of Ray’s contemporaries were inspired by ongoing archaeological work in Egypt and Ethiopia, for as Susan Gillman explains, “To unearth a glorious racial past, as in the theory of the African origins of Western civilization, was also to signal a prophetic future, as in Ethiopianism’s signature biblical refrain (‘Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God’ [Ps. 68:31])” (8). The act of laying claim to a “line of influence from Ethiopia to Egypt and then to classical civilization” as the novelist Pauline Hopkins does in Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self (1901-1903), and as many other prominent African American intellectuals did at the turn of the century, has been readily recognized as an act of racial activism (Gillman 51). But twentieth-century African Americanists—perhaps as a reflexive backlash against a long history of white appropriations of the classics preceding the flourishing of late-nineteenth-century black classicism—have increasingly remembered the classical Greco-Roman
tradition only as a past and present vehicle of European cultural imperialism. As a result, especially when compared to the Harlem Renaissance’s rich African roots, Ray’s classical adaptations have too often been viewed as indicative of capitulation to “white” aesthetic and cultural values, for example in Sorby’s claim that Ray “withdraws into…classical references” (23).

Rather than limiting the representational possibilities of Ray’s poetry to those of the two periods she falls between, Reconstruction literature of the nineteenth century on the one hand and the Harlem Renaissance on the other, I propose a practice of reading for “flashbacks” that, in promoting communal acts of remembering, look forward to possible futures (that may or may not have come to pass). Black classicism as a field of inquiry facilitates the recovery of alternative trajectories of historical consciousness, such as Cordelia Ray’s excavations into the classical past. As Xiomara Santamarina has suggested in discussing the merits (and demerits) of periodization, “a close focus on temporality allows us to tease out the overdetermined nature of histories as they are created, circulated, and revisioned in a cultural milieu” (309). For example, Ray’s turn-of-the-century backwards glance at Douglass and Dunbar supported their canonization in African American history even as it introduced a strategy of classical comparison that has become occluded, submerged under the master narrative of the African roots of African American cultural innovation. Susan Gillman’s concept of “occult time” as a kind of multidimensional temporal consciousness that “constructs mystical relations between past, present, and future” in American race melodramas during the same time period
(such as Ethiopianism in *Of One Blood*) offers a paradigm for theorizing other constructed race histories that have not been remembered so well, such as Sojourner Truth’s aforementioned adaptations of the “Libyan Sibyl” trope, or Ray’s representations of African American inheritances of classical Greek and Roman cultural and literary legacies (201).

Attentiveness to Ray’s poetic politics of memorialization—without layering on the expectation that her racial politics should match those of contemporaries like Hopkins or the burgeoning trend toward pan-Africanism in the twentieth century—offers a glimpse of an alternative way of mobilizing the ancient past at the fin-de-siècle. Rather than seeking to affirm African influences on Greco-Roman culture, Ray exposes the fabricated nature of Europe’s proprietary claims to the classical tradition and its conscription of that tradition in its imperial and racial politics. She does this, in part, through poetic meditations on the nature of sculptures as material artifacts unearthed from the sediment of the past, accessible to all. As Janet Gray writes, “The poetics of time concerns not only how a poem reflects its contemporaneity but how it looks back, how it remembers, what it forgets, its marking a temporal divide and reconstructing a time before” (20). In Ray’s case, the sense of an unbroken poetic tradition running from ancient Greece and Rome to her pen—demonstrated by her ability to revisit the ancient past through verse, like an archaeologist scraping away the sediment from a vital monument—reconstructs many nineteenth-century African Americans’ belief in the capaciousness of the classics.
I. Excavating the Classical Past: American Mythologies of Death and Freedom

Archaeological excavations constituted a vibrant aspect of nineteenth-century Americans’ awareness of and interest in the ancient past. From the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1748 and their subsequent excavations to the cataloging of the ruins of the Ethiopian city Meroë in 1844 and the search for Troy in the 1870s, and from the extraction of Egyptian mummies to the Venus de Milo, the unearthing of ancient artifacts, ruins, and remains captured the imaginations of eighteenth and nineteenth century writers and artists. Mysteries of origin, design, and purpose blended with general curiosity about the everyday lives of peoples in the ancient Mediterranean and Nile basin regions. When were Egypt’s great pyramids built? What were the citizens of Pompeii doing when Mount Vesuvius erupted? Questions such as these spurred the flourishing of poems, novels, paintings, and sculptures that imaginatively reconstructed the lives and cultures of ancient peoples. A classical and pre-classical past that had for so long been preserved only in manuscripts and select artifacts suddenly became open to expansion by literally digging into the past.9

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9 As Caroline Winterer observes in The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910 (2002), the rise of archaeological excavations and popularity of visual mediums such as sculpture meant that by the “late nineteenth century” there was “more of a focus on seeing the ancient world than there had been in the eighteenth century” (126, emphasis in original). For further reading on the influence of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Ethiopian antiquities and ruins on nineteenth-century American visual culture, see especially Winterer, The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900 (2007); Joy S. Kasson, Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture (1990); Scott Trafton, Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania (2004); Susan Gillman, Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult (2003); and Joyce K. Schiller, “Nydia: A Forgotten Icon of the Nineteenth Century” (1993).
As the previous chapter has documented, sculpture was a key element of neoclassical revival in nineteenth-century American culture. Cordelia Ray picked up on this theme, producing several poems that explicitly reference sculpture as an artistic medium linking nineteenth-century neoclassical efforts to those of the classical past, and dozen of others that feature idealized bodies described as “sculpted” or “statuesque.” No one has studied Ray’s uses of sculptural imagery aside from characterizing her poems “The Venus of Milo” and “Listening Nydia” as classically influenced. Addressing this lacuna, the following analysis shows how these two important poems—and Ray’s sculptural metaphors in general—represent her conscious positioning of herself as an inheritor of the artistic legacy of classical Greece and Rome, an inheritance that was of course contested by a long history of European proprietary claims to that legacy. The theme of excavation, or digging into the classical past, that so inspired popular nineteenth-century neoclassicism, reemerges in Ray’s poems as a form of cultural memory that points to its own constructedness, challenging the historical fiction of exclusionary access to classical authority.

“The Venus of Milo” encapsulates themes that Ray returns to again and again: sculpture, classical mythology, artistic inspiration, and the idealized female form. The sonnet, published in Poems, begins with an invocation to the famous sculpture of the goddess of love, the Venus de Milo, which had been discovered on the island of Milos in 1820 [Figure 4.2]. The recovered artifact, the poem insists, transports
nineteenth-century observers back to walk with cultural giants of classical antiquity, watching the first moments of inspiration:

O peerless marble marvel! what of grace,
Or matchless symmetry is not enshrined
In thy rare contours! Could we hope to find
The regal dignity of that fair face
In aught less beautiful? We would retrace,
At sight of thee, our willing steps where wind
The paths great Homer trod. Within whose mind
Wast thou a dream, O Goddess? (ll. 1-8)

The mystery of vanished artists of antiquity, as much as the lingering traces of beauty that remain, inspires Ray’s reflections. The material and cultural remnants of ancient Greece—for example, Homer’s writings or the rediscovered Venus de Milo—function as conduits for memorializing and imagining afresh the ancient past and its sources of artistic inspiration.

But the legacy of the Greco-Roman goddess of love in American culture was complex, as a well-read black woman like Ray would have known. As discussed in Chapter Three, the figure of Venus by the nineteenth century had acquired a parodic double—that of the sexually available or sexually “excessive” African woman, exemplified by the labeling of Saartjie Baartman as the “Venus Hottentot” and printed graphics depicting “sable Venuses.” Venus nicknames merged with stereotypes of wanton black sexuality that were coming to a height in the decades after Emancipation with the policing of miscegenation and the rise of rape accusations against black men in association with the lynching epidemic. The
Figure 4.2. *Venus de Milo* (c. 100 BCE)
Marble. Louvre Museum, Paris, France

bastardized classical reference to the goddess of love and sex parodied black sexuality, using the classical tradition to popularly reinforce violence against African Americans. What, then, might it have meant to Cordelia Ray, an African American poet, to have turned to the classical *Venus de Milo* and reclaimed her as an embodiment of artistic inspiration running directly from ancient Greece to herself?

Ray’s representation of the act of looking at the “peerless” *Venus de Milo* also calls to mind a range of potential contexts in which nineteenth-century Americans might have gazed on *Venus’s* form. Wealthy travellers or art enthusiasts might have visited the Louvre in Paris—indeed, some wrote newspaper articles describing their experiences—while those who stayed at home likely saw plaster casts or copies in marble or bronze. As the *Daily Inter Ocean* reported in 1896, “Millions of copies of
her have been made and sold. She has adorned the virtuoso’s gallery, the middle-
class drawing-room, and the lodging-house back parlor. She has descended in bronze
to the prosaic uses of a paper weight. She has acquired a pile for many a peripatetic
Italian image seller” (“He Found the Venus”). In a particularly stunning display, the
World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 featured a “fifteen-hundred-pound
chocolate statue of Venus de Milo” (Samuels 128). The life-size chocolate nude
could not have failed to draw remarks regarding its color and sensual decadence,
echoing the blatantly eroticized “sable Venuses.”

Ray’s poem, however, eschews these American spectacles in favor of the
imagined landscapes and architecture of ancient Greece, re-appropriating the
sculpture as a portal to an “original” past imagined and reanimated in the present:

Nearer pace
Brave Hector, reckless Paris, as we gaze;
Then stately temples, fluted colonnades
Rise in their sculptured beauty. Yes! ’tis Greece,
With all the splendor of her lordliest days,
That comes to haunt us: ere the glory fades
Let Fancy bid the rapture never cease. (ll. 8-14)

By the final lines, the poem’s fanciful memorialization of the unknown sculptor
responsible for the Venus de Milo, Homer, and other artists of antiquity become the
inspiration for creativity in the present day, including Ray’s own poetic artistry.
Ray’s speaker engages in a study of the Venus’s “rare contours” that parallels the
eroticization of nineteenth-century nudes such as Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave and
“sable Venuses,” but here the sculpture’s form stands in for the lost “sculptured
beauty” of Greek architecture—an eroticization of cultural loss. The tension between
the rhyming end words “Greece” and “cease” in the sonnet’s sestet enacts the inextricability of the classical past with expressions of loss in nineteenth-century American culture—losses of unknowability (“Within whose mind / Wast thou a dream, O Goddess?”), death (“splendor” replaced by “haunting”), and cultural decline (“ere the glory fades”), the latter exemplified by Venus’s racialized and commercialized American appropriations.

Ray’s sonnet contains no explicit references to race or to the stereotype of the “sable Venus”; however, the poem’s placement of the black female poet as a rightful witness to and inheritor of the classical past and its artistic legacy is itself an act of re-appropriation. The Venus de Milo is a literal piece of the classical past to whose cultural significance Ray’s poem insists any and every viewer has claim. In the poem’s narrative of the viewer who becomes caught up imagining “the paths great Homer trod,” ancient Greece is not exclusive territory: the African American poet can walk in this cultural landscape no matter how many barriers are thrown in her way by her contemporaries, because commemoration of the classical past is a rhetorical strategy and as such it cannot be “owned” by any group no matter how persistently it has been deployed in the past as a way of legitimizing that group’s cultural superiority.

Ray’s poem “Listening Nydia” again demonstrates the black female poet’s right to imagine and lay claim to a classical past that speaks to nineteenth-century American contexts—in this case the disastrous eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that buried Pompeii and that acts as a classical precedent for the death tolls and infrastructural
damage of American slavery and the Civil War. Using a quote from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s popular novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) as epigraph and drawing on the physical details of Randolph Rogers’s neoclassical sculpture *Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii* (1855), Ray memorializes the fictional character of Nydia (first introduced in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel) as though she were a real resident of ancient Pompeii [Figure 4.3]. Bulwer-Lytton’s novel, which inspired both Rogers’s sculpture and Ray’s poem, was extremely popular in Britain and the U.S. because it offered a page-turning story about Pompeii and its residents that matched the public’s desire to learn more about the mysterious city that had been buried by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 C.E. and only recently rediscovered in 1748. The excavation of Pompeii in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries joined an increasing number of archaeological discoveries that heightened interest in ancient Greek and Roman culture: “Pompeii and Herculaneum were…popular tourist attractions for those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ‘culture hounds’ on their Grand Tour of the continent. Not only were the well-preserved remains of the cities of interest, but so was speculation on the lives of their inhabitants” (Schiller 40). In his tour of Pompeii, the British author and later baron Edward Bulwer-Lytton was captivated by a fellow tourist’s observation that in the “utter darkness” that descended on Pompeii during the eruption “the blind would be the most favoured…and find the easiest deliverance” (Bulwer-Lytton x). In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the blind Nydia helps her beloved Glaucus and his lover Ione escape from the ash-covered city, but
afterwards in despair over her unrequited love for Glaucus, she throws herself into the sea.

In “Listening Nydia,” Ray celebrates the blind girl’s ability to find her way out of Pompeii using her heightened senses and sympathizes with her passionate devotion for Glaucus. While the details of her story originate with The Last Days of Pompeii, what is especially striking is that Ray’s Nydia evokes the exact pose and attitude of Rogers’s sculpture Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii:

Breathless she stood, her graceful head bent low,  
And dainty fingers round her chiseled ear;  
The cherished staff held tenderly as erst,  
When knew the tender heart nor grief nor fear. (ll. 1-4)

Like the neoclassical sculpture whose fifty-plus marble copies decorated museums and homes across the nation, the Nydia of Ray’s poem cups her “chiseled” ear in one
hand and her staff in the other, listening for the sounds of the sea. Her “motionless, intent repose” and “sculptured attitude” becomes the focal point of the poem as Ray dramatizes the moment of listening. Around her, the scene of Pompeii’s demise slowly unfolds:

The mountain lava-washed, raised menacing
Its peaks majestic toward the brooding sky;
And unappeased, the earth groaned piteously,
While multitudes aghast, fled cowering by.
But still pale Nydia stood amid the wreck,
In sculptured attitude: the broken lights
Shed magic radiance o’er her, and she gleamed
Like a chaste vision caught on starlit nights. (ll. 25-32)

Read alongside “The Venus of Milo,” the poem offers a striking parallel account of the reanimation of an ancient landscape via contemplation of a work of art. In this case, however, Rogers’s sculpture is not a literal relic of the ancient past, but a neoclassical semblance, a nineteenth-century retelling of Pompeii’s last moments using a fictional character. For Ray, memorializing the classical past is an exercise in imagination and cultural flexibility. Just as she claims the Venus de Milo as an inspiration for poetry not exclusive to those of European descent, she easily incorporates Nydia’s story into her array of classically inspired verses.

As suggested above, the story of Pompeii was of especial interest to nineteenth-century Americans because of the site’s recent rediscovery, Mt. Vesuvius’s continuing volcanic activity, and the scale of the calamity of its eruption in 79 C.E.—a tragedy easily adapted to sublime and sentimental genres, for example in James Hamilton’s oil painting The Last Days of Pompeii (1864) or Bulwer-Lytton’s novel—as well as the unanswerable questions about the fate of Pompeii’s citizens (Schiller
41). In particular, the haunted quality of the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the unexpected graveyard of thousands, presented an analog to the continuing cultural relevance of death and dying for a nation faced with a staggering loss of life during the course of slavery, the Civil War, and their aftermaths, including in the makeshift camps of freed slaves, in which “as many as one in four would die” (Cavitch 226). Continuing racial violence through lynching, rape, and other abuses disproportionately affected African Americans. It was also during the 1860s that Giuseppe Fiorelli realized that the gaps left in the sedimented layers of ash at Pompeii were left behind by the decomposed bodies of Vesuvius’s victims. He employed a technique of injecting plaster into these gaps to recover casts of the bodies in the poses in which they died. The contorted plaster casts presented tourists with visual records of the pain and suffering of ancient Pompeians—their shapes like macabre shadows of the idealized forms of neoclassical and recovered classical sculptures [Figure 4.4].

Images of death, injury, and suffering of African American slaves and, later, lynching victims, were another kind of shadow dogging nineteenth-century American visual culture, from the widely-circulated abolitionist records of slave abuse and injury to the popular postcards of lynchings cropping up by the end of the century.\(^\text{10}\)

Like Pompeii’s victims, these black sufferers became sources of gruesome fascination, unnerving reflections of the dark underside of the nation’s agricultural

productivity under slavery and the violent constructions of whiteness through racial policing. Photography also recorded U.S. Civil War soldiers’ deaths and disfigurements in a manner previously unimaginable, providing public spectacles of such as the one described in the *New York Times* in 1862 when Matthew Brady exhibited stereographic images of “The Dead of Antietam”: “You will see hushed reverent groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men’s eyes” (qtd. in Samuels 74).

In Ray’s poem, Nydia’s statuesque form is the counterpoint to these ancient Roman and nineteenth-century American visual histories, an observer and conduit between past and present suffering: “Her features shone pure in the fitful gleams /
That broke o’er column, arch and fleeing slave, / O’er speechless gladiator and blue streams” (ll. 18-20). While Nydia listens, the poem directs the viewer’s gaze to her ideal body as a vivid contrast to the surrounding disaster. She could as well be the marble statue observing the wreckage of slavery and the Civil War from an American gallery.

These increasingly circulated images of death and dying—in the ancient world, in the war, and at home—joined a genre of poetry that was especially dominated by women writers in the nineteenth century, and which, as we have seen, Ray was also versed in: the elegy. In periodicals and commonplace books and private letters and journals, women mourned the loss of infants and children (as well as parents, siblings, and friends) in verse. Because the loss of a family member, especially a child, was a common experience, and because it was undeniably a domestic concern, many women felt able to write about the topic. The trend fed an increasing association between women’s writing and sentimentality in the nineteenth century based on the figure of “the dead child” (Bennett 56). But women poets’ attitudes towards death were not always as piously sentimental or melancholy as the genre of dead child elegies would suggest. Paula Bernat Bennett, for example, records the development of a poetic subgenre of “domestic gothic” in which “wraithlike female subjects” play out “women’s literal and figurative vulnerability to death” (116). Following Max Cavitch’s suggestion that elegies are “about the struggle to make the most out of some sign of the inarticulable, the trace of the loss that abides in our mostly inaccessible lives,” one could also say Cordelia Ray, when she chose a
commemorative mode for ancient Greco-Roman and modern African American history, chose elegy (15).

Looking death in the face resulted in a wide variety of versification. Hannah Flagg Gould’s 1836 poem “The Child’s Address to the Kentucky Mummy” offers a useful parallel to Ray’s mobilizations of the ancient past via an American antiquity.11 The poem’s child speaker inquires into the former life of a mummified body, which was found in a limestone cavern near Mammoth Cave in 1815, and which had become an object of curiosity to New England viewers after it was collected and put on display while en route to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. The mummy’s race was visually ambiguous, but likely Native American due to its provenance. Beginning with the child’s well-intentioned designation of the desiccated body as “Mistr[11]ess Mummy,” declaring “Be pleased to speak out, as we gather around, / And let us hear something about you!”; the poem highlights the tension between the silence of the remains and the voice of the speaker, who must rely on archaeological clues to hazard any guess about the mummy’s former life:

Say, whose was the ear that could hear with delight
The musical trinket found nigh you?
And who had the eye that was pleased with the sight
Of this form (whose queer face might be brown, red, or white,)
Trick’d out in the jewels kept by you? (ll. 21-25)

Since the child’s questions cannot be answered by the mummy, she reasons through a set of projections—about what is known and what must remain unknown—and

speculations: “Who was it” who arranged her this way? “[W]hose was the ear” and “who had the eye” that loved her? But beyond her clothes, teeth, and accessories, the mummy “furnish[es] nothing.” The past remains silent.

Because she is an American mummy, a kind of national artifact or American antiquity, the mystery of the Kentucky mummy’s origin is taken seriously as a part of the lost cultural history of the American continent. Her unknowable past recalls the questions, assumptions, and avid curiosity of nineteenth-century Americans regarding the lives of the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean. But American attitudes regarding “ownership” or cultural inheritance of Old World artifacts, especially those found outside Europe, were problematic. As S.J. Wolfe explains, Egyptian mummies were ransacked and often treated as objects or artifacts, rather than as remains, in the U.S.: “mummy parties” offered by upper class Americans gave attendees the opportunity to “unwrap” the remains as a kind of parlor game; similarly, during the American Civil War, the paper-maker Isaac Augustus Stanwood began importing mummies for the rags needed to make paper which were in short supply due to the war (132, 189). Just as mummies and valuables were snatched indiscriminately from Egypt, classical Greek artifacts such as the Venus de Milo were appropriated from territory that was then part of the Ottoman Empire. In the case of the Venus, French naval officers who were exploring the island of Milos recognized the significance of

12 For scholarship on comparisons between ancient Native American civilizations and Greco-Roman and Egyptian antiquity, see, for example, Robert D. Aguirre, Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture (2005); and Eric Wertheimer, Imagined Empires: Incas, Aztecs, and the New World of American Literature, 1771-1876 (1999).
the statue after its initial discovery and after helping unearth it, they hastily arranged for its sale and transportation to the Louvre in Paris, where it remains today. Such acts of cultural appropriation reflected a distorted belief in European (and consequently white American) “ownership” of the classical past—an ownership that also extended to the right to decide which artifacts and remains to venerate as valuable pieces of the world’s cultural history, and which to dismiss as tangential or insignificant to that history.

Gould’s poem is an important interlocutor for the cultural and historical contexts of Ray’s poetics of memorialization because it employs a visual mode of gazing on the body—and the body-as-artifact—that resonates closely with Ray’s sculptural imagery and her interest in classical or neoclassical artifacts as bearers of history. Ray’s speaker in “The Venus of Milo” asks of the recovered classical sculpture: “Within whose mind / Wast thou a dream, O Goddess?” In doing so, she echoes the questions Gould’s speaker directs to the silent remains. Both poems expose cultural and temporal gaps between the discovered objects and their interlocutors, gesturing toward the absences as well as imagined narratives encoded in recovered ruins and remains. Similarly, but in a shift to commemoration of very recent history, Ray’s ode to Lincoln addresses the way the assassinated president’s body had entered American visual culture through preservation techniques and memorials encouraging iconicity. In “Lincoln,” recited at the unveiling the Freedmen’s Monument in 1876, the former president’s body becomes both preserved
artifact and signifier of an understood national history—really an American mythology—of Emancipation, which the poem both commemorates and contests.

Like the “Kentucky Mummy,” but to a much greater extent, Lincoln’s body is a national relic. His lanky form and characteristic long face were already iconic during his lifetime, as many printed cartoons attest, but in death his body became a substituted symbol for his actions, an incorporation of American national memory—both through artistic visual memorials like the Freedmen’s Monument and through his physical body’s very public display during the funereal tour that passed through dozens of cities in the Northeastern U.S. in April 1865 after his assassination. As Shirley Samuels points out, at each stop along the way, people flocked to memorial ceremonies whose main attraction was Lincoln’s body, but “What they saw became increasingly macabre as the embalmers competed with the warm weather to slow the body’s decay” (101). In one particularly detailed account of the embalmers’ preparations, Lincoln’s transformed body takes on the characteristics of sculpture as the measures taken to prevent decay drain his body as surely as the desiccated Kentucky Mummy:

There is now no blood in the body, it was drained by the jugular vein and sacrdly preserved, and through a cutting on the inside of the thigh the empty blood vessels were charged with a chemical preparation which soon hardened to the consistency of stone. The long and bony body is now hard and stiff, so that beyond its present position it cannot be moved any more than the arms or legs of a statue. The scalp has been removed, the brain scooped out, the chest opened and the blood emptied. All this we see of Abraham Lincoln...is a mere shell, an effigy, a sculpture. He lies in sleep, but it is the sleep of marble. (Pittsburgh Daily Post, April 22, 1865, qtd. in Samuels 100)
The public’s fascination with Lincoln’s body here borders on the grotesque, but what is really interesting is that it is the same kind of attention furnished the “Kentucky mummy” and other antique remains, right down to the language of inspection and dissection. Disemboweled and embalmed for the purpose of preservation, Lincoln enters national memory as another American antiquity.

The tour of Lincoln’s embalmed body has been most famously memorialized in Walt Whitman’s elegy “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” but whereas Whitman’s poem zooms out to encompass a decaying floral landscape through which “night and day journeys a coffin,” Ray’s poem zooms in to look at the body eleven years later, now truly metamorphosed into sculpture in the form of the bronze Freedmen’s Monument: “To-day, O martyred chief, beneath the sun / We would unveil thy form…” While Ray’s poem does not dwell on the man’s physical characteristics, it cultivates among listeners an awareness of the transformation from flesh to bronze that has taken place through a series of referential cues that would have drawn the eye back to the sculpture again and again. “To-day in radiance thy virtues shine,” writes Ray, and “Such moral strength as gleams like burnished gold / … / were thine.” The sun that had encouraged the decay of Lincoln’s physical body eleven years before now glints and sparkles off of the bronze memorial as evidence of his “virtues” and “moral strength.”

The scene of gazing on Lincoln’s body that Ray’s poem memorializes even as it is being performed (as the recital of the poem provides the capstone to the monument’s unveiling) invites the same kinds of questions as those brought up by
“The Venus of Milo” and “Listening Nydia”: In this act of memorialization, who is being implicated as the inheritor of the monument’s legacy? What identities and collectivities are taking shape? The bronze monument, designed by sculptor Thomas Ball, depicts Abraham Lincoln standing as the “Great Emancipator,” hand outstretched above an African American freedman crouched at his feet, who was modeled after Archer Alexander, the last man in Missouri to be recalled to slavery under the Fugitive Slave Act (“Oration by Frederick Douglass”). The dedication ceremony for the Freedmen’s Monument took place at Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C. on April 14, 1876 in the presence of President Grant, the Justices of the Supreme Court, numerous Senators, and “many other distinguished personages” as well as a crowd that included many African Americans, some of whom had been former slaves (“Oration by Frederick Douglass”).

Of great importance here is the distinction between memorialization of Lincoln and memorialization of Emancipation itself, or the man versus what he came to stand for. The difference was being actively negotiated even as the dedication of the monument was taking place—in the recitation of the Emancipation Proclamation, in Douglass’s speech, in explanations of the sculpture’s design, and in Ray’s poem. What is especially striking is that even though the monument itself depicts both Lincoln and Archer Alexander, a former African American slave, and even though

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13 A pamphlet published shortly afterwards provides a glimpse into the progression of exercises leading up to the unveiling of the monument, which included a procession, the playing of “Hail Columbia” by a marine band, a prayer offered by Bishop John M. Brown of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, a reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, and two substantive speeches—one by James E. Yeatman of the Western Sanitary Commission and one by Frederick Douglass.
the push for Emancipation came about through the efforts of thousands of abolitionist activists and former slaves and not Lincoln’s final go-ahead, the story of the Emancipation monument, repeated again and again to the point of entering American mythology, always returns to Lincoln and the idea of African Americans’ immense gratitude to him for his Emancipation Proclamation. Like most enduring stories, this one contains a measure of truth—the Freedman’s Monument was almost entirely funded by former slaves with the idea of constructing a monument to Lincoln’s memory—but the continuing rhetorical adherence to the idea of black gratitude to Lincoln takes on a life of its own.

A speech by James E. Yeatman, president of the Western Sanitary Commission, a white volunteer organization that oversaw collections and chose the sculpture’s design, details the circumstances of the monument’s funding and commission. The idea for the monument was first conceived by Charlotte Scott, a freedwoman in Marietta, Ohio, who after hearing the news of Lincoln’s assassination, said to her former mistress, “The colored people have lost their best friend on earth! Mr. Lincoln was our best friend, and I will give five dollars of my wages towards erecting a monument to his memory” (“Oration by Frederick Douglass” 18). Scott’s donation and idea was conveyed to the Western Sanitary Commission by way of General T. C. H. Smith, a military commander in St. Louis in 1864, who wrote to Yeatman, “Such a monument would have a history more grand and touching than any of which we have account. Would it not be well to take up this suggestion and make it known to the freedmen?” In his speech Yeatman underscores the extent to which
subsequent donations collected by the Commission for the monument were all “free-will offering[s] without solicitation” from freedpeople, including $12,150 from colored soldiers in Natchez, Mississippi (“Oration by Frederick Douglass” 18). All in all, the Commission offered $17,000 in raised funds to Thomas Ball for the execution of the bronze monument.\(^{14}\)

While Yeatman’s speech sentimentalizes the idea of black gratitude, Douglass’s speech following the monument’s unveiling and the recitation of Ray’s poem provides insight into why the story of Charlotte Scott’s contribution of five dollars is so important for the public work of memorialization happening at the dedication ceremony. Offering congratulations to African American citizens on this concrete tribute to Lincoln, Douglass suggests that its existence is a step toward legitimizing African American citizenship in the eyes of its detractors by offering material proof of the race’s gratitude toward its benefactors:

> Fellow-citizens, I end, as I began, with congratulations. We have done a good work for our race to-day. In doing honor to the memory of our friend and liberator, we have been doing highest honors to ourselves and those who come after us; we have been fastening ourselves to a name and fame imperishable and immortal; we have also been defending ourselves from a blighting scandal. When now it shall be said that the colored man is soulless, that he

\(^{14}\) Yeatman’s speech streamlines the actual history of the monument’s funding quite drastically by foregrounding the original idea and its final product eleven years later, cutting out a period of several years in which the Western Sanitary Commission sought funding from a wide variety of sources (thus marginalizing the contributions already collected from freedpeople) for an elaborate design by Harriet Hosmer that ultimately became too expensive to execute, then merging temporarily with the National Lincoln Monument Association in Springfield, then with the National Lincoln Monument Association sponsored by Congress, from which it finally withdrew in 1871. Thomas Ball’s design was a back-up plan, much smaller in scale and less expensive than the Commission had originally envisioned. For a detailed history, see Savage 90-114.
has no appreciation of benefits or benefactors; when the foul reproach of ingratitude is hurled at us, and it is attempted to scourge us beyond the range of human brotherhood, we may calmly point to the monument we have this day erected to the memory of Abraham Lincoln. (“Oration by Frederick Douglass” 15)

This incisive conclusion to Douglass’s speech, coming after a critique of Lincoln’s pre-Emancipation politics, cuts to the heart of the rhetorical build-up surrounding the monument. He points out the absurdity of having to disprove “the foul reproach of ingratitude,” but nevertheless he also recognizes the political and social necessity of doing so for the sake of present and future race relations; his congratulations to African American citizens acts as both a performance and a critique of the political work of memorialization.

Early in the speech, Frederick Douglass characterizes Lincoln as the “father” of white Americans, but reminds his auditors that in this national family, Lincoln treated African Americans only as “step-children.” The former president delivered the Emancipation Proclamation at a time convenient for him, deaf to the urgent calls of abolitionists before the war forced his hand: “We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity” (“Oration by Frederick Douglass”). Douglass’s application to his auditors, both white and black, to consider the inequalities perpetuated by Lincoln’s pre-Emancipation policies again calls to the foreground the inclusivities and exclusivities potent in acts of memorialization.

The design of the Freedmen’s Monument has a striking resonance with Douglass’s metaphor of African Americans as Lincoln’s “step-children” in the
position of needing to prove their legitimacy for the inheritance of American
citizenship. To return to the trope of Lincoln’s body as an American antiquity, as his
sculptural form stretches his hand out over the crouching form of Archer Alexander,
he reenacts the gesture of incorporation into a national family seen in the previous
chapter in the graphic “Columbia’s Noblest Sons,” which depicts Columbia with arms
outstretched over Washington and Lincoln. Now the national son becomes national
father (or step-father), legitimizing another branch of the “family tree.” Clearly,
however, the monument’s design also evokes the SEAST emblem’s kneeling,
supplicant slave with arms enchained. As Emancipator, Lincoln stands
authoritatively, whereas Alexander is placed in a subordinate position. As Kirk
Savage has charged in Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument
in Nineteenth-Century America (1997), rather than inventing a new visual paradigm
for representing African American freedom and citizenship, the monument merely
replicated the image of the kneeling supplicant that had dominated abolitionist visual
culture: “Ball’s design was a failure to imagine emancipation at the most fundamental
level” (119).

The monument was based on an original in Italian marble that Thomas Ball
had designed soon after Lincoln’s assassination in the hope that one day he might
receive a commission for it. In his speech, Yeatman goes into detail regarding
alterations requested by the Western Sanitary Commission. Ball was asked to change
the freedman’s bent arm to a clenched fist “breaking the chain which had bound
him,” “making the emancipated slave an agent in his own deliverance” (“Oration by
And whereas Ball’s original design represented a generic form of the kneeling freedman wearing a liberty cap, the Commission asked him to instead use as a model Archer Alexander, a freedman known personally to Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, a leading member of the WSC: “A photographic picture was sent to Mr. Ball, who has given both the face and manly bearing of the negro. The ideal group is thus converted into the literal truth of history without losing anything of its artistic conception or effect” (“Oration by Frederick Douglass” 19). Yeatman’s rhetorical assertion in his dedication speech that the Freedmen’s Monument represents “the literal truth of history” (when in fact, as Savage notes, Lincoln and Alexander had never met in real life) underscores the extent of the entanglement between acts of memorialization and the fabrication of national memory (115). The Western Sanitary Commission’s narrative of the Freedmen’s Monument and how it came about solidifies a cultural correspondence between Lincoln’s sculptural body and the gratitude of freed African Americans (figured through Alexander) that, as Douglass points out, positions the latter as “step-children” to the national father, step-children whose legitimacy must always be proved through acts of submission and respectful tribute. If Lincoln’s body—as national relic and national father—stands in metonymically for the patria, it also inscribes a version of national belonging in which African Americans must memorialize history as represented by the Freedmen’s Monument in order to be counted amongst its rightful citizens.

But the acts of memorialization taking place at the dedication ceremony for the Freedmen’s Monument were many. The medium of sculpture points to one kind
of national memory—the monumental as symbolic snapshot of cultural relations.

While Yeatman’s speech seeks to confirm the monument’s representations as history, Douglass’s speech seeks to expose the racialized annexations and abridgments inherent in this American mythology of Emancipation. Both rhetorical projects understand how the perceived physical permanence of the sculpture operates as a symbol for the perpetuity of race relations as represented in the figures of Lincoln and Alexander: the natural qualities of preservation inherent in bronze and stone undergird their cultural function as mediums for memorialization. As Savage maintains, “In bronze, Archer Alexander can never rise and stand, never come to consciousness of his own power. The narrative remains frozen in place, the monument perpetuating its image of racial difference for eternity” (117). But recognition of the rhetorical fabrications (such as those by Yeatman) that construct the monument’s seeming cultural fixity as a representation of racial relations opens the way to consideration of how, with a shift in perspective and genre, other cultural narratives might be told—and other national priorities identified—using the same metaphoricis of monumentality.

In a manner akin to her reclaiming of the Venus de Milo, Ray’s poem “Lincoln” points to this possibility of a different cultural narrative of Emancipation and racial relations through its metaphorical layering of an even more durable “invisible” monument to freedom over that of Lincoln’s monumental body and its position of dominance over the freedman. Though Ray was not present in Washington, D.C. at the commemoration ceremony, she knew the monument’s basic
premise and design, and, like Douglass, she responded to the implied cultural
narrative of Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator.” Ray’s poem does not contest the
idea of memorializing and praising Lincoln (it does so profusely), but it sutures the
implied racial divisions inherent in the narrative of black gratitude because the
poem’s projected “we” offering “living tribute” is an interracial, national coalition
whose interests—it becomes clear as the poem progresses—are not limited to racial
legitimization in the guise of congratulatory sentimentalism. Instead, the collective
task entrusted to the national “we” is the creation of a second, “invisible” monument
memorializing freedom itself, not Lincoln as the symbol of freedom:

As now we dedicate this shaft to thee,
True champion! in all humility
And solemn earnestness, we would erect
A monument invisible, undecked,
Save by our allied purpose to be true
To Freedom’s loftiest precepts, so that through
The fiercest contests we may walk secure,
Fixed on foundations that may still endure,
When granite shall have crumbled to decay,
And generations passed from earth away. (ll. 61–70)

Ray’s assertion that this “invisible” monument, which represents U.S. citizens’
cooperative, interracial commitment to the true principles of freedom and equality,
will long outlast Ball’s sculpture invites a more capacious interpretation of who and
what should be remembered in this dedication ceremony: Lincoln’s body and the
crouching freedman are no longer the only monumental representation of

15 I have not been able to verify whether Ray saw Ball’s design before she wrote
“Lincoln.” Presumably she received a verbal description along with the request for
an original poem—and the story of the monument was widespread in the newspapers,
so she would have also seen descriptions there.
Emancipation being offered. In this new spin on the political work of memorialization happening during the unveiling, Ray’s poem gestures toward a national responsibility to remember the ethical and social principles that fueled Emancipation—principles that were increasingly at risk of being forgotten by the end of Reconstruction.

Ray’s “invisible” monument, a twin to the Freedmen’s Monument made rhetorically salient through the memorial metaphorics of the occasion, speaks most urgently to the state of racial relations in 1876, near the end of Reconstruction, and in coming generations. Constitutive of “our allied purpose to be true / To Freedom’s loftiest precepts,” it is a kind of rhetorical memorial to the future, a national commitment to freedom and equality at a historical moment when the social reforms of Radical Reconstruction were beginning to dissolve. This penultimate stanza stands out from the rest of the poem both because of the strong rhetorical gesture of invisible monumentality and because of its clear political statement of the necessity of interracial cooperation (“allied purpose”) in the service of social equality.

Using the metaphor of the invisible monument, Ray calls upon her local and national audience to remember the principles of freedom and equality that spurred abolitionism through actions that uphold “Freedom’s loftiest precepts”: this is a form of memorialization that she figures as more important and more enduring than the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument or any other physical monument because it enacts cultural values rather than simply representing them. In the metaphor, the “invisible, undecked” monument is itself the commitment to freedom rather than a
visual symbol commemorating freedom, which is easily forgotten or discarded.
Within the logic of the sentence, once the monument is built, the commitment exists, and it exists “so that” the nation’s citizens, imagined now as figures on a grand pedestal, can “walk secure, / Fixed on foundations that may still endure, / When granite shall have crumbled to decay.” Here the durability of the metaphorical monument—of cultural values—exceeds that of the physical Freedmen’s Monument, whose granite base and even bronze effigies will gradually deteriorate through exposure to the elements. Ray may very well be thinking of ruins and fragmented sculptures of antiquity, like the Parthenon or the Venus de Milo, whose physical “decay” are visually iconic partly for their suggestion of unknowable loss. Projecting forward to a time when “generations” will have “passed from earth away,” Ray suggests that even when the physical evidence of Emancipation’s commemoration will have fallen to ruin, the corresponding principles of freedom—so long as they are secured in the present—will remain undamaged.

But the metaphor of invisibility works on another level besides signaling the existence of a figural monument erected within the rhetoric of the poem. Ray’s poetic description of the people’s “allied purpose” in upholding the principles of freedom projects a confidence in the nation’s desire to do so that the socio-political context of 1876 does little to bear out. In this year of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, an exemplary microcosm of national interests, there were almost no
exhibits dedicated to African American history or culture.\textsuperscript{16} Even the donations contributed to the Freedmen’s Monument fund by freed African Americans had been at risk, just a few years earlier, of being subsumed within national Lincoln memorial projects whose designs made no gesture toward Emancipation.\textsuperscript{17}

This literal invisibility of African American citizenship in large-scale memorials to national history contrasts sharply with the increasing hypervisibility of blackness in an era during which lynchings and racial violence were rising unchecked. The systemic dismissal of the promised social reforms embedded within the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments finds an ironic echo in Ray’s figuration of the nation’s commitment to freedom as “invisible”—i.e. imperceptible, absent. Even as her tone is confident in its appeal to an interracial national coalition capable of upholding racial equality, her choice of the word “invisible” suggests that progress in this area has been disappointingly limited. In 1876, as the Freedmen’s Monument is dedicated, the possibility of real interracial cooperation and political progress in the present and future is in danger of being overshadowed by the visible symbol for progress—already—accomplished—the commemorative sculpture.

\textsuperscript{16} As Mitch Kachun documents, “black representation in all aspects of the Centennial Exposition was minimal,” limited to a few works such as the African American sculptor Edmonia Lewis’s \textit{Death of Cleopatra} and the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s commemorative statue in honor of Richard Allen, the denomination’s founder (308). Narratives of national unity took precedence: “One of the mottoes of the Exposition explicitly emphasized sectional reconciliation: ‘No North, No South, No East, No West—The Union One And Indivisible.’ No comparable concern for racial healing was evident in either the motto or in the Exposition itself” (Kachun 306-7).

\textsuperscript{17} See note 14 above.
While the poem’s formal addressee is Lincoln (“O martyred chief”), its sentiments are intended for the markedly interracial attending audience, as well as for a larger group of citizens imagined by the poem’s auditors and made possible by reprintings of the proceedings in newspapers and pamphlets. As a poem of tribute accompanying a national monument, the implied audience is the entire nation. Reprintings brought both the monument and Cordelia Ray to widespread attention. As a reviewer of Ray’s *Poems* wrote in *The Independent* in 1910, the “tributes to poets and champions of freedom” included in this volume “reminds us that we learned of her years ago” as the author of the “Lincoln” ode (“Poems. By H. Cordelia Ray”).

But the “invisible” monument to freedom that Ray’s 1876 poem champions does not appear in a revision of the poem that concludes her 1910 volume, *Poems*. In

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18 Reprintings of Ray’s “Lincoln” (before her revision of the poem published in 1910) most often appeared as part of a larger description of the event of the dedication of the Freedmen’s Monument. See, for example, “Glory of Lincoln” in the April 15, 1876 edition of the *National Republican*, which includes the full poem; “Lincoln” in the May 25, 1876 edition of *The Independent*, which reprints two stanzas; and a lengthy account of the day’s proceedings (including Ray’s full poem), which seems to be based on the *National Republican* article from 1876, in Joseph T. Wilson and Frederick Douglass’s *Emancipation: its course and progress, from 1481 B.C. to 1875 A.D., with a review of President Lincoln's proclamations, the XIII amendment, and the progress of the freed people since emancipation; with a history of the Emancipation monument* (1882), pp. 157-192.

19 Other evidence of Ray’s positive reception in both African American and national print circuits consists of her inclusion in the Woman’s Building Library at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, as discussed above, and an array of reviews and printed mentions, for example Gertrude Bustill Mossell’s assertion in *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894) that Ray had “won for herself a place in the front rank of our literary workers.” See also Susan Elizabeth Frazier’s “Some Afro-American Women of Mark,” *A.M.E. Church Review* (1892); and Jessie Fauset’s review of Ray’s *Poems* in *The Crisis* in 1912.
the excision of the entire penultimate stanza (reproduced above), the “invisible”

figure literally disappears. On the one hand, Ray’s revision, which is titled “Lincoln

Centenary, February 12, 1909,” reflects the shift in context from an occasional poem

read aloud at a specific event to a poem included in a published volume. She

removes the references to the dedication ceremony’s time and place in the opening

stanzas in order to render the poem accessible to readers who may be unaware of its

original context. And without references to the Freedmen’s Monument, the

corresponding stanza erecting a twin monument to “Freedom’s loftiest precepts” no

longer carries the same connotative force, so it too is discarded. On the other hand,

these seemingly minor changes utterly transform both the metaphorical core of the

original poem—monumentality—and its self-reflexive work of analyzing the inherent

socio-political inclusivities and exclusivities of public commemoration.

Was this shift in tone merely incidental, reflective perhaps of a willingness to

eschew politics for the sake of aesthetic cohesiveness within the volume, or can we

read the absences in the 1910 version as political statements in themselves? In 1909,

as Ray looked over her most famous poem for the upcoming Lincoln Centenary, was

the stanza about freedom’s monument too optimistic in hindsight? After several
decades of Jim Crow and a continuing onslaught of systemic racial violence including

lynchings averaging a hundred per year by the turn of the century, Ray’s original

celebration of “our allied purpose to be true / To Freedom’s loftiest precepts” begins
to ring hollow. In her speech to the first annual conference of the NAACP in 1909,
Ida B. Wells reported that the number of African American people lynched in the last
decade was at least 857 (Wells, “This Awful Slaughter”). For Ray in 1909, the coitalional, interracial “monument” upholding freedom’s principles is no longer merely a rhetorical “invisibility,” shadowed by the threat of its absence, but a literal absence. The revised poem begins very differently than the 1876 invocation, “Today, O martyred chief, beneath the sun / We would unveil thy form.” By its excision of the metaphor of monumentality, the revision refocuses instead on the distance between an imagined future that has not come to pass and present circumstances of interracial violence:

We lift the curtain of the past to-day,  
And chase the mists and stains of years away,  
Once more, O martyred chief, to gaze on thee,  
The worth and purpose of thy life to see. (ll. 1-4)

Remembering Lincoln and Emancipation requires more of an effort in 1909 because of the challenges of intervening years. As Ray suggests, readers must “chase the mists and stains of years away” in order to see clearly. These “mists and stains” evoke a sense of clouded or murky purpose and a history of broken promises, even bloodstains, that have severed the optimism of the post-Emancipation past from the reality of the present. In revising her own imagined future of interracial dedication to “Freedom’s loftiest precepts” symbolized by the “invisible” monument to freedom, Ray reveals her conscious awareness of the possible successes and failures of rhetorically constructed relationships between pasts, presents, and futures, including those between classical antiquity and nineteenth-century African American experience.
II. Literary Artifacts: Remembered Voices and Racial Canons

Cordelia Ray’s elegies to race heroes and antislavery activists, including Frederick Douglass and Paul Laurence Dunbar, offer a different kind of memorialization than that offered by such visual paradigms as invisibility, monumentality, or excavation into the classical past. In contrast with her commemoration of Lincoln, Ray’s poetic memorials to Douglass and Dunbar focus on voice—in oratory and in poetry—as the most important quality fixing them in cultural memory and linking them to a classical tradition. In Ray’s elegies, both published in her 1910 *Poems*, Douglass and Dunbar emerge as the preeminent orator and poet of their race, the former explicitly compared to Cicero—“Our Cicero”—and the latter implicitly to Vergil. In these analogies, the most famous figureheads for ancient Roman intellectual and literary culture of the Golden Age act as reference points for a vision of African American oratorical and poetic achievement that Ray constructs via acts of retrospective memorialization. Unlike her 1876 “Lincoln,” these poems cultivate a sense of identity and unity supported by a constructed historical consciousness that is racial rather than national or coalitional.

Ray’s elegiac poetry after “Lincoln,” and her commemorative mode as a whole, including her classical allusions, can be productively aligned with the project of post-Emancipation African American self-definition. Viewed broadly,

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20 Mainstream American history schoolbooks like Samuel G. Goodrich’s *A Pictorial History of Ancient Rome* (1849) named Cicero “the greatest of Roman orators” (165) and Vergil the “greatest poet of the Augustan age” (264). Goodrich’s text, intended for secondary schools, was one of the most popular texts available on the subject (Nietz 248).
Emancipation triggered a rhetorical paradigm shift in black-authored texts, from the central cause of denouncing slavery (especially through slave narratives and activist tracts), supported by white abolitionists, to the largely self-directed project of building up a base of literary talent and intellectual and historical inheritances. The effects of Emancipation on intensifying rhetoric promoting African American education have already been examined in Chapters One and Two. In the figure of Sojourner Truth as a sibyl or oracle “predicting” Emancipation we have seen how anticipatory rhetoric worked especially well retrospectively—that is, the prophetic figure retained its effectiveness for Truth long after Emancipation. To these rhetorical projects that use Emancipation as a historical fulcrum we might add the retrospective power of the “genre of ‘race history,’” which, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp explains, “emerged as an increasingly popular form of black literary expression” only after Emancipation as African Americans looked ahead to an autonomous future (201). Cordelia Ray’s elegies to race heroes, especially abolitionists like Douglass, function as a hybrid mode of retrospective prospection that celebrates them both as “prophets of the coming new order,” as Maffly-Kipp would have it, but also as representatives of a bygone era, as artifacts that, like the Venus de Milo, might be unearthed and reinterpreted in the present even as they belong, fundamentally, to the past (212).

Ray’s commemorative mode encompasses a vast array of named mythological, literary, and historical predecessors, from Greco-Roman women of myth (Venus, Niobe, Echo, Antigone) to celebrated orators, poets, and artists of the
Western tradition (Cicero, Dante, Milton, Raphael, Emerson, Longfellow, etc.) to race heroes and antislavery activists (L’Ouverture, Douglass, Dunbar, Garrison, Stowe, etc.). An especially important unnamed influence in Ray’s oeuvre is the Roman Golden Age poet Ovid, whose mock-epic *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) includes an expansive constellation of mythological stories, particularly of bodily transformation, that record and hybridize Greek myth into Roman history, a rhetorical move analogous to Ray’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century retrospective blending of classical and Western mythology and literature with African American history and culture. Undergirding this loose analogy is Ray’s direct engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* via her poems “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint,” which recover and revitalize the voices of these mythological women—who, in Ovid’s text, are effectively silenced or limited in their speech via metamorphosis into stone in a manner akin to the silence of recovered classical artifacts—alongside those of modern African American women such as herself, Phillis Wheatley (who also wrote a poem on the figure of Niobe that may have inspired Ray), and the spiritual-singer “Malindy” whom Dunbar celebrates and Ray memorializes as an echo within Dunbar’s poetic legacy. A figure akin to a black female Ovid recording and marking her place in literary history via a trans-historical assemblage of recovered voices, Ray performs a version of canon-formation that eschews racial exclusivity in favor of a more capacious view of African American literary inheritances. As in Gillman’s model of “occult time,” Ray assimilates classical and modern voices into a web of “mystical relations between past, present, and future” (201).
In reading Cicero, Vergil, and Ovid as classical counterparts to Douglass, Dunbar, and Ray—analogies that Ray’s poems either state or perform—I also propose that we read the paradigmatic shift from the Roman Republic to Empire in 27 BCE as a momentous political transition comparable in scale to nineteenth-century U.S. Emancipation. In the years leading up to the American Civil War, the question of slavery triggered equal social upheaval as the violent paroxysms of the disintegrating Roman republic. I do not argue that these two historical transformations themselves are parallel (they represent very different socio-political changes), but rather that the rhetorical responses of ancient Romans and nineteenth-century Americans to these events are comparable: they are historical fulcrums encoded by the work of prospection and retrospection. In other words, just as Cicero’s *de Oratore* performs for posterity the qualities of the ideal republican orator just decades before his violent murder at the hands of the Second Triumvirate and the fall of the Republic, for Ray, Douglass’s abolitionist cause and his exemplary embodiment of black manhood and oratorical skill is a legacy to be equally revered. Though American Emancipation brought about nominal freedom, the coalitional national rallying behind the cause of abolition and racial equality represented by the “invisible” monument in Ray’s 1876 “Lincoln” ode had, by the time of Douglass’s death in 1895 and the onset of Jim Crow and racial violence, passed away as surely as the Roman Republic after Cicero’s death.

Nineteenth-century Americans viewed the Roman Republic, embodied especially through Cicero, as a model of virtue compared to which the Empire could
only be a shadow. As recorded in Samuel G. Goodrich’s *A Pictorial History of Rome* (1849), a popular secondary school textbook,

> The republic produced men who, in moral dignity and force of character, were perhaps never surpassed on earth. They had transmitted their names, if not their virtues, to their descendants. Even to the very close of the empire, the men who, sunk in slavery and baseness, still called themselves Roman citizens, seemed to live in the midst of their shades. (167)

For ancient Romans, the hybridized legacy of the Republic embedded in master narratives of the new Empire and molded to the contours of Greco-Roman mythology—as in Vergil’s relation of the mythical founding of Rome in the *Aeneid* and in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—ameliorated, at least partially, the disjuncture between past and present. Similarly, the literary contributions of post-Emancipation African American writers who were also unofficial “race historians,” such as Dunbar and Ray, served to bridge the gap between antebellum anticipation of a more just, autonomous future and postbellum mourning of futures that had not come to pass (for example, the end of systemic racism or racial violence). As we will see, like Vergil reconstructing a mythological past for Augustus’s new empire, Dunbar looks back to African American folk and vernacular culture for a racially autonomous origin story. And like Ovid hybridizing mythical metamorphosis with Roman history, ending with the apotheosis of Julius Caesar, Ray uses her commemorative verses and classical allusions to knit together a capacious canon made up of literal and literary artifacts, from recovered sculptures like the *Venus de Milo* to remembered voices like Echo’s.

Replicating the contours of Maffly-Kipp’s designation of the post-Emancipation moment as the birth of “race history” as a distinctive genre, Kenneth
W. Warren argues that “[i]t was only subsequent to the abolition of slavery that black and white writers in the U.S. context came collectively to hold the race accountable for producing a literature” (16). Whereas Warren reads this transitional period of post-Emancipation accountability as marked by a “prospective” attitude, with authors and commentators judging “the best work had not been written but was yet to come,” his interpretation is dependent on a post-twentieth-century perspective that reads the African American literary “canon” (figured in the singular) as a reflection of the era of Jim Crow segregation, not as part of a longer history of black literary and rhetorical inheritances such as that imagined by Ray at the end of the nineteenth century as she looks back beyond even antebellum America to a classical Greco-Roman past (42). Despite occasional hesitations regarding erotic themes “often carried to excess” in Ovid’s verses, nineteenth-century Americans recognized the Metamorphoses as a “valuable record” of ancient mythological stories which might otherwise have been lost (Goodrich 6). When examined with the right questions in mind, Ray’s adoption of an Ovidian assemblage of classical and modern voices offers for posterity a vision of the future of African American literature penned at the turn of the twentieth century that is more capacious than Warren’s Jim Crow-era canon—one that is worth remembering at this particular critical juncture, as scholars of African American literature seek to define past and present interpretive paradigms.

In Ray’s tribute to Douglass, “In Memoriam (Frederick Douglass),” grief for a lost leader acts as a binding force unifying African Americans into “a people,” a
collective made possible by identifying a set of values and ideals exemplified by the
now-absent, but no less inconsequential, Douglass, the abolitionist hero:

\begin{verbatim}
  The funeral bells have rung; there was no dearth
  Of sorrow as the solemn cortege passed;
  But ours is a grief that will outlast
  The civic splendor... (ll. 4-7)
\end{verbatim}

As in Ray’s 1876 tribute to Lincoln, here she identifies a lasting cultural influence
associated with a national icon that outstrips the symbolic value of any performed
ceremonies or monuments. But whereas in “Lincoln” she presents the invisible
monument to freedom as an interracial, coalitional enterprise ‘built’ in a former
president’s memory, here the “grief that will outlast / The civic splendor” is
specifically identified as grief felt by an African American community. Figuring him
both as a “princely leader of his race,” and its “great chieftain,” Ray praises Douglass
for his advocacy on behalf of formerly enslaved African Americans and on behalf of
his race in the wake of Emancipation. His intellectual achievements and public
iconicity, contrasted with his early life as a slave, lead Ray to a narrative of individual
uplift supported by his superiority of character, for, she writes, “the air / Of slavery is
poison unto men / Moulded as Douglass was.” While presenting a problematically
stratified version of who can and cannot endure the humiliations of subservience
without “manhood assert[ing] itself,” Ray’s bootstraps narrative for Douglass (from
slave to “princely leader”) echoes that of Cicero’s rise to political influence, from
\textit{novus homo} to consul.

In setting up her comparison between Douglass and Cicero, the most
celebrated orator of the late Roman Republic, Ray uses physical details of
respectability such as Douglass’s “majestic presence” and “silv’ry head” to support her celebration of his “matchless speech” and his work in support of racial equality. As documented in Chapter Two, Cicero’s intellectual and public persona is always twinned with representations of manly, upright bodily comportment. Here, too, Douglass’s iconic physical presence supports the resonant strength of his voice, both blending seamlessly in his support of abolition and represented fittingly in heroic couplets. Douglass’s voice, figured here as loud enough and persuasive enough to carry across the Atlantic Ocean, becomes the weapon of choice for this “warrior knight”:

He was a valiant leader in a cause  
   Than none less noble, though the nation’s laws  
   Did seem to spurn it; and his matchless speech  
   To Britain’s sea-girt island shores did reach.  
   Our Cicero, and yet our warrior knight,  
   Striving to show mankind might is not right! (ll. 45-50)

The doubled designations, “Our Cicero, and yet our warrior knight,” set up a portrait of Douglass in which his public service to the causes of abolition, racial equality, and women’s suffrage—his embodiment of the Roman orator identifying and defending the people’s needs—acquires added urgency as it is characterized as a battle with Douglass as champion.

Ray’s strategy of memorializing Douglass in this way has the effect of identifying and consolidating an African American community whose concerns the absent Douglass espouses. As a studied reflection of African American citizenship and community values with Douglass as figurehead, the poem functions as an extension of the rhetorical work Douglass was engaged in during his life, as seen
above in his speech at the unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument. In the Roman
Republic, the orator functions as a similar kind of focal point for the consolidation of
community and public values:

The identity of the orator is part of a larger imagined community that he
constructs in his speech, a res publica (‘affair of the people’) to whose nature
and values Roman oratory repeatedly returns. Roman orators rhetorically
fashion a version of their state for which their proposed course of action is the
natural or inevitable path…. This ability to construct a community again
depends upon auctoritas: the orator must have the credibility to engage in
large-scale cultural definition and the authority to mark out the essential
qualities of the Roman state and its values. (Dugan 180-181)

In Ray’s poem, Douglass carries out the cultural duties of the ideal orator with respect
to an African American community that is distinct from an all-encompassing national
community that continued to uphold slavery decades after Douglass first began
speaking out against it. In the long view, however, Douglass’s principles won the
support of that nation, and so taking a retrospective view allows Ray to fashion
Douglass as “Our Cicero,” a leader whose rhetorical persuasiveness made racial
equality a national priority, and in whose absence “the race” must solidify the
common social and political bonds that Douglass’s rhetoric imagined. Addressing
this absence, Ray asks, “May not we / Do aught to emulate him whom we mourn?”
and as an explanation of the implied answer of “yes,” she adds, “We are a people
now, no more forlorn / And hopeless. We must gather courage then, / Rememb’ring
that he stood man among men.” Ray constructs Douglass as a “Cicero” whose
eloquence and rhetorical persuasiveness is just as effective remembered in African
American historical consciousness for purposes of unifying the race as it was in life.
In support of this politicized memorial to Douglass’s legacy as preeminent African American orator, Ray again returns to the trope of orator as cultural and political “warrior” by crowning Douglass with the laurel wreath that applies equally to poets and intellectuals as well as to Greek athletic victors and Roman martial heroes:

The Romans wove bright leafy crowns for those
Who saved a life in battle with their foes;
And shall not we as rare a chaplet weave
To that great master-soul for whom we grieve?
Yea! Since not always on the battle-field
Are the best vict’ries won; for they who yield
Themselves to conquer in a losing cause,
Because ‘tis right in God’s eternal laws,
Do noblest battle; therefore fitly we
Upon their brows a victor’s crown would see. (ll. 71-80)

By suggesting that Douglass deserves his laurels not for literal battle but for a cultural battle against racism and slavery—so often a “losing cause” in the course of American history—Ray crowns Douglass as a race hero. By memorializing Douglass in this way, as a celebrated and laureled “Cicero,” Ray ensures his place in African American cultural memory, but the analogy also firmly defines Douglass, like Cicero, as an actor in a bygone era to which the present is only a shadow of an unfulfilled, but hoped-for future. Just as the story of how Cicero was murdered as the republic disintegrated around him is a part of his legacy, so Ray commemorates Douglass’s life at a historical moment when the age ofcoalitional activism of behalf of racial equality—as exemplified by abolitionism and Radical Reconstruction—has also passed away.
Of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the much-loved African American poet who died young at age 33 in 1906, Ray says too, “Let us remember, with the fondest pride, / That Fame’s immortal wreath has crowned his brow.” “In Memoriam Paul Laurence Dunbar” capitalizes on the motif of the celebrated writer chosen by the “Muse of Poetry” for poetic achievement:

The Muse of Poetry came down one day,  
And brought with willing hands a rare, sweet gift;  
She lingered near the cradle of a child,  
Who first unto the sun his eyes did lift.  
She touched his lips with true Olympian fire,  
And at her bidding Fancies hastened there,  
To flutter lovingly around the one  
So favored by the Muse’s gentle care. (ll. 1-8)

Beginning with this effusive account of divine gifts, Ray’s poem fashions Dunbar as the most important African American writer of the post-Emancipation era, a poet two generations younger than Douglass, and one younger than Ray: “Who was this child? The offspring of a race / That erst had toiled ‘neath slavery’s galling chains.” With his eyes on the sun and his lips “touched…with true Olympian fire” even as an infant, the poetic direction of Dunbar’s life’s work is clear.

Most striking in Ray’s account of Dunbar’s career, though, is her representation of his progression through different stages of poetic production, from “simple” lays to “loftier themes” to “solemn majesty”—a progression that echoes that of the Roman poet Vergil from the pastoral Eclogues to the agrarian Georgics to his famous epic Aeneid. While the parallel remains unidentified as such, the tripartite nature of Vergil’s career clearly inspires Ray’s organization of Dunbar’s poetic achievements in his short life. Ray depicts Dunbar’s first poems as coming straight
from the heart of the newly awoken poet blessed by the Muse’s favor: “And soon he
woke to utterance and sang / In sweetly cadenced and in stirring strains, / Of simple
joys, and yearnings, and regrets.” Dunbar’s first two published poetry volumes,
collected in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896, are glossed here as pastoral lays reminiscent
of Vergil’s *Eclogues*, written circa 40 BCE in the voices of “the folk,” who for Vergil
were herdsmen, but for Dunbar are African Americans on Southern plantations
memorialized in his famous dialect poems. Ray continues the Dunbar/Vergil analogy
with a turn toward Dunbar’s later work, naming in particular his famous poem “When
Malindy Sings”:

Anon to loftier themes he turned his pen:
For so in tender, sympathetic mood
He caught the follies and the griefs of men.

His tones were various: we list, and lo!
“Malindy Sings,” and as the echoes die,
The keynote changes and another strain
Of solemn majesty goes floating by… (ll. 14-20)

In this second stage of his career, the African American folk of Dunbar’s “pastorals”
reappear in sympathetic poems addressing “loftier themes” and the “follies and the
griefs of men,” which for African American laborers at the turn of the twentieth
century involved unending and often coerced agricultural labor, including in
sharecropping. To suggest that Ray is comparing Dunbar’s dialect poems
foregrounding agricultural labor to Vergil’s *Georgics* is not a stretch. As Margaret
Ronda has separately argued, “The overarching theme of many Dunbar poems echoes
a key passage in Vergil's *Georgics*: ‘Everything / was toil, relentless toil, urged on by
need’ (1.145-46),” and in his “images of labor without respite or recompense,”

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Dunbar critiques “the agrarian myth of racial freedom achieved through agricultural work” (864). Ray’s inclusion of the reference to a famous Dunbar poem “When Malindy Sings,” and his 1896 volume of the same title, clearly identifies this middle stage of Dunbar’s poetic development in chronological order before the “keynote changes” to “solemn majesty” and hints of grandeur in which “We seem to hear the surge, and swell, and moan / Of soft orchestral music far away.” These latter gestures toward an epic register in Dunbar’s poetry—made especially vivid by the oceanic imagery of “surge[s]” and “swell[s]” echoing the storm that begins the Aeneid—complete the Vergilian analogy. However, Ray’s swift transition to the next stanza, “Paul Dunbar dead! His genius cannot die!” reenacts the abruptness of Dunbar’s early death, reminding readers that the called-for epic poem has not been written even though his early career promised so much. The loss of Dunbar is a loss not only of the person, but of the most celebrated African American poet who was not done writing. The cultural loss that Ray memorializes—especially of a possible missing epic in Dunbar’s oeuvre—therefore, becomes also a promise and challenge for the future of African American poetry and literary culture: to match that which Dunbar did not ultimately produce.

Ray’s elegies to Frederick Douglass and Paul Laurence Dunbar stand out because they are not limited to the brief sonnet form that she chose for most of her memorials to antislavery activists and prominent African Americans, and because they invoke the classical giants Cicero and Vergil, respectively the most celebrated public intellectuals of the late Roman Republic and the early Empire. Even the
Roman periodization roughly matches the two-generation gap between Douglass, the abolitionist champion, and Dunbar, the young fin-de-siècle poet. Just as Cicero, by Quintilian’s time, emerged in retrospect as the single most important orator in the Republic, especially for his speeches denouncing Catiline and his conspiracy to overthrow the government, for Cordelia Ray’s generation—coming of age in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—Frederick Douglass was the most important nineteenth-century African American public figure, remembered for his lifelong dedication to the protection of racial equality. Though many other well known figures of his generation, including Sojourner Truth, shared Douglass’s commitment to speaking out against slavery and racial oppression, no one else could so well match the Ciceronian qualities of the masculine, erudite public intellectual and advocate as Douglass did.

Similarly, in the early years of Augustus’s reign, Vergil marked out his cultural influence not through oratory, but through his poetry and especially the *Aeneid*, which celebrated Augustus and the Roman Empire by memorializing the mythic founding of Rome by Aeneas. In the new political regime, Vergil oriented his verses towards constructing and consolidating a new mythic history for the empire that opened out to the promise of future greatness. Dunbar’s relationship to the early African American literary canon in the aftermath of Emancipation is similar to Vergil’s foundational role in Rome’s Golden Age. His influence crops up again and again for Harlem Renaissance authors and twentieth-century poets, some of whom have remarked that Dunbar’s poetry “mattered” very much in black communities and
to black poets even when he was not included in school curricula—a future of continued commemoration that Ray’s poem anticipates (Alexander, “Dunbar Lives!” 398). In identifying Douglass and Dunbar as two great intellects and cultural influences in the African American rhetorical and literary tradition akin to what Cicero and Vergil symbolized for ancient Rome, Ray begins to build up a sense of African American literary historicity—of what the canon could look like to future generations.

Dunbar’s constructed memorialization of a mythical racial past becomes a key element in interpretations of—and critiques of—his role in “the canon,” and in Ray’s role in negotiating these interpretations through her rhetoric of the Muse’s favor and the Vergilian analogy. Born in Dayton, Ohio in 1872, Dunbar took on agrarian, folk themes in many of his poems that blended his own experience with that he imagined for Southern plantation slaves and African American laborers past and present. As Michael Cohen has pointed out, Dunbar’s dialect verses, like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s a generation before, were a pivotal cultural crossroads in the late nineteenth century because they “circulated as the fantasy of difference, seeming to come from the illiterate and inarticulate folk, but also available to literate and articulate readers” (252). Dunbar became a spokesperson for his race to such educated readers because

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21 Dunbar’s marked oscillation between dialect poetry and “standard” verse has been a subject of much debate, especially given his foundational status in the African American canon. While many of his contemporaries loved his dialect ballads and verses for their nostalgic evocations of plantation life in the old South, many African American poets of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, felt that Dunbar played into white stereotypes of black nostalgia for slavery and did not differentiate himself
his verses seemed to offer “a more authentic look at the real black folk” than minstrelsy or white-authored dialect poems—essentially embodying “the fantasy of an oral exchange captured in print” as though the composed verses could be preserved as a record of the words of historical persons (Cohen 248, 252). For Dunbar, too, these constructed memorials to a fading racial “past” offered a personal connection to that past, solidifying a sense of belonging in a national African American community.

In her elegy “In Memoriam Paul Laurence Dunbar,” Ray’s choice to highlight “When Malindy Sings” among the many “tones” of Dunbar’s oeuvre suggests a conscious investment in the way Dunbar memorializes black female voices. In an exemplary case of Cohen’s point about the irony of “captur[ing]” oral expression in print, Dunbar’s poem sets up a comparison between the white “Miss Lucy,” who sings from a music book, and the African American singer Malindy, who, knowing the songs by heart, “jes’ spreads huh mouf and hollahs” songs that “strikes yo’ hea’ and clings.” The written poem attempts to preserve the beauty of Malindy’s spontaneous singing even as it dismisses the young Miss Lucy’s studied efforts:

G’WAY an’ quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—
Put dat music book away;
What’s de use to keep on tryin’?
Ef you practise twell you’re gray,
You cain’t sta’t no notes a-flyin’
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F’om de kitchen to de big woods
When Malindy sings. (ll. 1-8)

substantially from white representations of black dialect such as in the poems of Irwin Russell.
The silencing of Miss Lucy by Dunbar’s narrator is followed by the hushed reverence of “Robins, la’ks…Fiddlin’ man…Mockin’-bird…[and] Folks a-playin’ on de banjo,” all of whom stop to listen. The songs that Malindy sings are named in turn: “Come to Jesus,” “Rock of Ages,” and finally “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” In Dunbar’s poem, Malindy becomes the mouthpiece for spirituals and hymns that have a particular emotional resonance for African Americans, especially the latter, which was composed orally in the 1850s or 60s by Wallis Willis, a Choctaw freedman, and later popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Malindy’s voice, a black female voice, carries forward the songs of African American oral culture, embedded in Dunbar’s own verses:

Don’t you heah de echoes callin’
F’om de valley to de hill?
Let me listen, I can heah it,
Th’oo de bresh of angels’ wings,
Sof’ an’ sweet, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,”
Ez Malindy sings. (ll. 67-72)

The narrator’s enticement to readers to listen for Malindy—“Don’t you heah de echoes callin’…?”—becomes an echo in Ray’s own poem as she urges readers to recall and replay in their minds Dunbar’s masterful renderings of the “tones” of African American song and poetry:

Paul Dunbar dead! His genius cannot die!
It lives in songs that thrill, and glow, and soar;
Their pathos and their joy will fill our hearts,
And charm and satisfy e’en as of yore. (ll. 25-28)

The resonance of Dunbar’s “genius” within the songs, and echoes of songs, that he has left as his poetic legacy introduces a complex layering of oral and written culture:
Ray’s written poem memorializes Dunbar’s “When Malindy Sings” as both a written representation of African American oral culture and as a song in itself. It is striking that Ray chooses to preserve, in particular, Malindy’s voice as the thread running through these overlapping acts of memorialization. Out of all of the voices in Dunbar’s poems, “we list, and lo! / ‘Malindy Sings.’”

For Cordelia Ray, a female poet, to highlight this poem of Dunbar’s points not only to an appreciation for his celebration of black women’s singing, but also to a conscious retrieval of Malindy’s voice as a predecessor and vernacular complement to her own learned poetic voice, which here encompasses both Malindy’s and Dunbar’s. In Ray’s Sonnets and Poems, a marked self-consciousness about the sources of poetic inspiration recurs throughout the verses, especially—as we have already seen in “The Venus of Milo” and “Listening Nydia”—those that reflect on recoveries of classical art and literature. When read alongside her strategy of memorializing Douglass and Dunbar in classical fashion as a modern Cicero and Vergil and her alignment of herself, too, as an inheritor of classical poetic inspiration, Ray’s poems on the Greco-Roman mythological figures Niobe, Echo, and Antigone emerge as similarly conscious redeployments of a constructed classical “past” for political purposes of present and future racial consolidation. Ray’s retrieval of Malindy’s voice from Dunbar’s poetic memorializations of African American folk culture finds its complement in “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint” in Ray’s retrieval of these women as predecessors, wholly or partially silenced in myth, whose classical legacy Ray finds equally resonant. In addition to her cultivation of seeds of African
American culture—such as Malindy’s voice or Douglass’s speeches—in the guise of reclaimed pieces of classical literary history embedded in her genteel poems, Ray suggests that poetic exchanges between African American literature and classical literature go both ways: perhaps the late nineteenth-century African American woman poet can give words to Niobe’s and Echo’s experiences when their silenced voices cannot.

Before turning to these mythical adaptations, a brief glimpse at another poem from Ray’s 1910 volume, “Invocation to the Muse,” presents an even clearer picture of her tendency to look to the classical literary tradition as a wellspring of poetic inspiration linked to a sense of responsibility for cultural expression. In this poem, Ray’s narrator pleads with a classical Muse (reminiscent of the “Muse of Poetry” who inspired Dunbar) to accept her offerings in exchange for “the priceless gift” of poetic inspiration, which had been hers once, but which the Muse has now withheld. The aspiring poet-narrator offers a “votive offering” at the Muse’s altar consisting of fire, “liquid dew,” and emotions “caught” from the hearts and souls of the people she has encountered:

I bring the music caught from hearts,—
Strange minor chords, sad yet so sweet,
Which pain has seared with ceaseless clasp,
And gladness with a clasp so fleet.

I bring the music caught from souls
Aflame with hope and deepest love,
And kissed by Life with throbbing lips
Into the peace of calmest dove. (ll. 25-32)
These offerings of souls’ and hearts’ music in exchange for the gift of poetic creativity demonstrate a give and take between not only the poet and her Muse, but also the poet and her people: the “music” of love and sadness is “Transformed into a stream of light, / …a harmony again” as the Muse’s intercession enables the poet to give back beautiful verses reflective of the lives and cares of the people. In the end, Ray figures her narrator as a privileged recipient of the Muse’s favor. Just as Dunbar is shown to have “caught the follies and the griefs of men” in his musical verses, so in Ray’s “In Memoriam” the aspiring poet collects “[s]trange minor chords,” like sorrow songs, mixed with joyful ones, to be embedded into poetry that speaks back to the people.

The cultural memorials, or “voice prints,” offered up within Ray’s elegies to Dunbar and Douglass as well as her “Invocation to the Muse”—Malindy’s voice, Douglass’s “matchless speech,” and the “[s]trange minor chords” of a melancholy people—exemplify a mode of cultural recovery which Ray also extends to the mythical figures Niobe and Echo. Ray’s “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint” bear witness to the experiences of women in classical Greco-Roman myth whose voices are circumscribed or silenced due to excessive divine punishment. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Niobe, the Phrygian queen and granddaughter of Jove, loses all fourteen of her children to the vindictive arrows of Apollo and Diana, who avenge their mother Latona after Niobe boasts of the abundance of her clan as opposed to Latona’s and insists the people desist in praying to Latona. In grief and shock after her sons’ and daughter’s cruel deaths, especially the last daughter, Niobe’s body
hardens into rock and the tears flow down as a waterfall from the cliff face of her now eternally wordless body (*Met.* 6.146-312). The nymph Echo’s story involves two transformations: first, the punishment of Juno, who takes away her voice—all but its ability to echo back what has already been said—after Echo’s distracting chattering prevents the goddess from catching Jove in an adulterous tryst; and second, the wasting away of her body into the rocks and hills after her offer of love is spurned by the beautiful Narcissus (*Met.* 3.339-510). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (the most developed classical source for both of these stories), in addition to the partial or complete silencing of these formerly talkative women, the grief of both Niobe and Echo is manifested physically in the transformation of their bodies into stone, into the landscape. In Ray’s poems the ultimate silence of classical landscapes and ruins discussed in the first section of this chapter joins with the poet’s knowledge of and recovery of “voice prints” embedded within the rock in the forms of Echo and Niobe.

Like Malindy’s voice, carrying the tones of African American spirituals so rarely heard in poetry before Dunbar, the lost voices of Echo and Niobe reverberating in Ray’s poems gesture toward a similar cultural—or perhaps more accurately mytho-cultural—recovery. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a mock-epic in dactylic hexameter, written in 8 C.E. (soon after Vergil’s *Aeneid*), that embeds within it hundreds of myths popular in Greco-Roman culture. In weaving these episodes together into playful epic form foregrounding the effects of bodily metamorphosis on human speech, Ovid composes a masterful cultural narrative that takes as its focus the echo of lost or changing voices in literary representation. In recent decades scholars have
been particularly interested in the gender dynamics of Ovid’s depiction of bodily metamorphosis and loss of voice, especially under circumstances of violence or coercion. In perhaps the most famous example of a woman’s loss of voice that feminist scholars have focused on, Philomela has her tongue cut out by her brother-in-law rapist, Tereus, who intends to prevent her from speaking of what he has done. Famously, Philomela does speak out by weaving her story—in “purple notes” that depict Tereus’s violations—into a tapestry that she sends to her sister, Procne, who sees and understands (Met. 6.412-674). Ovid, in representing this textual—from texere, to weave—“voice print” in Philomela’s tapestry embeds the representation of a muted, but legible, female voice as a wellspring for poetic inspiration and as a point of overlap between oral and written speech. This overlap recurs again and again in Ovid’s written depictions of bodily metamorphosis. As Lynn Enterline argues, “the idea, if not the actual sound, of the female voice is crucial to Ovidian reflection on the conditions, effects, and limitations of poetry and rhetoric,” including, of course, “the poem’s own scene of writing” (Enterline 17, 12). Voices such as Philomela’s,

22 For an extended analysis, see Patricia K. Joplin, “The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours”: Joplin retrieves Philomela’s actions as a mythical precedent for women’s active resistance—via artistry—against violence and exclusion from language by a masculine literary tradition. The “voice” of Philomela’s shuttle tells her story even when her voice has been stolen. Joplin’s title is also a direct response to Geoffrey Hartman’s 1970 essay “The Voice of the Shuttle,” which, Joplin argues, fails to recognize Philomela’s agency, thus re-appropriating Philomela’s voice again for a masculine literary tradition: “Perhaps because he cannot see the active, the empowered, the resistant in Philomela, he cannot see that the woman makes her loom do what she once hoped her voice/tongue could do.” Hartman’s title is, in turn, borrowed from Sophocles’ term for Philomela’s tapestry, a phrase recorded in Aristotle’s Poetics XVI.4.
Echo’s, and Niobe’s act as the subtext and entry point into Ovid’s own literary representations, and those of many poets after him from the Renaissance forward.23

In Ray’s poems, “voice prints” also become commemorative acts that function as hinges between past, present, and future: lost voices such as Douglass’s, when figured commemoratively as in Ray’s “Our Cicero,” gesture toward a unified African American community anchored by the act of remembering. Voice prints as signatures of oral speech embedded in writing are, of course, reminiscent of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s trope of the “Talking Book.”24 The silence of the perceived linguistically capable “Talking Book” for the illiterate black subject is, according to Gates, a sign of exclusion from a white literary tradition (that the now-literate black narrator contests by writing down his life story). Ray’s “voice prints” function oppositely: as echoes of voice in print, they call up vibrant memories of speech and song as opposed to failed potentialities. The apparent exclusion of oral culture from print figured in the “Talking Book’s” silence is countered by the inclusivity of the “voice print’s” resonance. But because Ray was writing during an era in which African American authored verses employing vernacular were somewhat rare—the most well known examples being Frances E. W. Harper’s “Aunt Chloe” series and

23 See, for example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s extended feminist analysis of the probable life circumstances of the real singer who may have inspired William Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper.” Her voice, like Philomela’s, Echo’s, and Niobe’s for Ovid, becomes a “figure” for Wordsworth’s poetic inspiration that DuPlessis seeks to recover through close reading and historical research.

24 “This general question of the voice in the text is compounded in any literature, such as the Afro-American literary tradition, in which the oral and the written literary traditions comprise separate and distinct discursive universes which, on occasion, overlap, but often do not” (Gates 132).
Dunbar’s dialect poems—and because she chose instead a definitively formal
technical style in accordance with her life experiences, her inclusions of markers of
dialect or song remain markers rather than performances of African American
vernacular (compare Ray’s “we list, and lo! / ‘Malindy Sings’” with Dunbar’s insider
boasting, “Jes’ you stan’ an’ listen wif me / When Malindy sings”). Ray’s approach
introduces a version of commemoration of African American culture authentic to
herself and her intellectual interests in classical antiquity that offers an alternative to
qualities some twentieth-century scholars of African American literature have termed
stylistically “authentic” because of their importance in the Harlem Renaissance—
dialect, representations of oral practices such as “Signifyin(g)” and doing the dozens,
and the rhythms and repetitions of spirituals, jazz, and blues.

In Ray’s mytho-cultural recovery of the lost and changed voices of Niobe and
Echo, Ray’s voice emerges as the vehicle for commemoration in a similar fashion as
it does for the Venus de Milo and the neoclassical Listening Nydia, not least because
both Niobe’s and Echo’s bodies turn to stone—as sculptural echoes of their former
selves that Ray fashions as recovered pieces of antiquity whose silences hide untold
stories. In the Metamorphoses, Ovid’s extended dramatization of Niobe’s
metamorphosis focuses on the increasing paralysis of the Phrygian queen’s grieving
body, offering for Ray, perhaps, a connection between the representation of
catastrophic grief—turning to stone—and the commemorative function of sculpture, a
connection she had already understood in her “Lincoln” ode and its recognition of the
role of Lincoln’s martyred body (whether mummified or sculpted) in the American
mythology of Emancipation. Niobe’s transformation begins as her last daughter dies in her arms:

\[
\text{Orba resedit}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Exe} & \text{nimes inter natos natasque virumque} \\
\text{Deriguitque malis: nullos movet aura capillos,} \\
\text{In vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis} \\
\text{Stant inmota genis; nihil est in imagine vivum.} \\
\text{Ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato} \\
\text{Congelat, et venae desistunt posse moveri;} \\
\text{Nec flecti cervix nec bracchia reddere motus} \\
\text{Nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscere saxum est.} \\
\text{Flet tamen et validi circumdata turbine venti} \\
\text{In patriam rapta est; ibi fixa cacumine montis} \\
\text{Liquitur, et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant.}
\end{align*}
\]

[Desolate, she sat amongst her lifeless sons and daughters and husband and grew rigid on account of these losses: the breeze moves no hairs, her countenance is drained of blood, her eyes, wide and unmoving, stand fixed in her sorrowful cheeks; nothing is alive in the likeness. That tongue, too, trapped inside the hard palate, thickens, and her veins cease their labor; neither can neck bend nor arms move, nor the foot; and the inner organs become rock. Yet she weeps and, encircled in the cyclone of a strong wind, is snatched away to her native country; there affixed on a mountain summit she becomes liquid, and even now tears trickle down from the marble.]

(\textit{Met.} 6.301-312)

As Niobe’s body stiffens and turns to stone, “that tongue [\textit{ipsa...lingua}]” that had caused the tragedy in the first place because of her boastful taunting of Latona also “thickens [\textit{congelat}]” and becomes immovable. Her voice is silenced, but her shocked anguish is imprinted on her countenance, which becomes only a “likeness [\textit{imagine}]” of her former living body. \textit{Imago}, which I have translated here as “likeness,” encompasses several other related meanings including “statue,” “image,” and “imitation.” The “\textit{marmor}” from which Niobe’s final tears drip down means
both marble, the natural substance, and wrought or carved marble, as in a statue. In
this metamorphosis, then, Niobe becomes a marble effigy of her former self—a
sculpture preserved as a reminder of the woman’s punishment, and as a
commemorative marker within Greco-Roman mythology and literary tradition.25

The commemorative value of sculpture in nineteenth-century American
culture, and neoclassical sculpture’s usefulness as a medium for retelling and
reimagining classical stories with modern issues in mind, renders Niobe’s
metamorphosis into a weeping statue a powerful symbol for commemorating a
mother’s grief. Just as Lincoln’s embalmed body (and, later, commemorative statues
of his body) touring through the U.S. encouraged national commemoration of the lost
father of the patria, Ray’s embedded rendering of Niobe’s sculptural body as “flinty
stone” within which is trapped a fierce “mother-love” hails Niobe as a representative
of mothers and mothers’ grief for lost children—a grief which, as mentioned earlier in
this chapter, was a poetic trope in the nineteenth century. In “Niobe,” sculptural
commemoration merges with the act of poetic commemoration, especially that
encoded within “voice prints.” Keeping in mind that the mythological story of Niobe
is the story of a semi-divine woman who speaks too well of herself (and too much),
and for this loses her fourteen children of whom she is so proud, her ultimate

25 Niobe’s story was also literally preserved in marble in numerous classical
sculptures known during Cordelia Ray’s lifetime, including a Roman copy of a Greek
group of Niobe and her children, the Niobids, that was discovered outside Rome in
1583 along with the Wrestlers and was brought to the Uffizi gallery in Florence in
1775.
metamorphosis into marble is especially devastating for its termination of her ability to speak.

In Ovid’s account, Niobe pleads with Latona twice after Apollo and Diana begin killing her children—once after the deaths of her seven sons, still in a rather antagonistic manner, “Pascere, crudelis, nostro, Latona, dolore...” [Feed, O cruel Latona, on our anguish…] (Met. 6.280); and again as she pleads desperately for the life of her smallest daughter “unam minimamque relinque! / De multis minimam posco...et unam [Leave this one, the smallest! / Out of the multitudes I beg for this one, the smallest too.]” (Met. 6.299-300). In Ovid’s dactylic hexameter, the long “o” sounds in the first line ending with “nostro...dolore [our anguish]” (with the exception of the first short “o” in dolore) and echoed again in “posco [I beg]” vocalize the wailing sounds accompanying her speech. The transformation of Niobe’s voice therefore is not only from arrogant boasting to anguished silence, but rather from boastfulness to grief-stricken wails to silence. It is this intermediary stage of a mother’s vocalized mourning that is especially evocative for African American cultural memory.

In “Niobe,” Ray’s voice memorializes Niobe’s grief by calling attention to the sounds of the queen’s “wailing prayer” that become muted—even in the midst of being vocalized—as Niobe’s body turns to marble. Ray’s sonnet begins with an apostrophe to Niobe as “O Mother-heart,” and the sestet is introduced with the parallel phrase, “O image of despair” (reminiscent, of course, of Ovid’s “imago”).
both direct addresses to Niobe use the same opening long “O” that sympathetically echo the mythical queen’s lamentations:

O Mother-heart! when fast the arrows flew,
Like blinding lightning, smiting as they fell,
One after one, one after one, what knell
Could fitly voice thy anguish! Sorrow grew
To throes intensest, when thy sad soul knew
Thy youngest, too, must go. Was it not well,
Avengers wroth, just one to spare? Ay, tell
The ages of soul-struggle sterner? Through
The flinty stone, O image of despair,
Sad Niobe, thy maddened grief did flow
In bitt’rest tears, when all thy wailing prayer
Was so denied. Alas! what weight of woe
Is prisoned in thy melancholy eyes!
What mother-love beneath the Stoic lies!

The vowel sounds, especially the wailing “O”s and Niobe’s “woe,” reverberate with the muted sounds of Niobe’s grief after that grief, “denied” sound, can only be expressed through “bitt’rest tears” trickling down the metamorphosed cliff face.

These embedded echoes of Niobe’s voice in Ray’s sonnet are made especially resonant by her question about the most fitting kind of commemoration for Niobe, “what knell / Could fitly voice thy anguish!” Of course, both Ovid and Ray do seek to “voice” the tones of her grief in their assonant verses.

Another voice, too, finds expression in Ray’s sonnet: that of the eighteenth-century African American poet Phillis Wheatley, who wrote a translation of Ovid’s Niobe in heroic couplets titled, “Niobe in Distress for Her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. And from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson.” As both Paula Bernat Bennett and Tracey L. Walters have noted, Ray was probably aware of Wheatley’s poem, so her take on Niobe a century later
may very well be an example of intertextual “Signifyin(g)”\textsuperscript{26}  For Ray to take
inspiration from Wheatley, the famed classical prodigy, would be natural given their
mutual interest in classical literature and Wheatley’s status as “the” African American
woman poet of early America. Bennett argues further that the nature of this
signifying has to do with the thematic content of Niobe’s story—the loss of the
Phrygian queen’s children standing in, in particular, for the deaths of slaves forcibly
transported from “‘Mother’ Africa” and for “two centuries of African American slave
mothers, denied the right to grieve, let alone protest, when their children were ripped
from them” (Bennett 199). This reading of Ray’s poem (and Wheatley’s) as a
comment on slavery and as a commemoration of a history of slave mothers’ suffering
certainly rings true in the sense that Niobe’s story is readily adaptable as a
representation of any grieving mother’s devastation. However, Bennett’s automatic
privileging of a possible reference to “‘Mother’ Africa” and to slavery as the most
valuable aspects of a turn-of-the-century African American poet’s oeuvre—i.e. her
focus on this poem to the exclusion of Ray’s others—re-inscribes the idea that literary
“authenticity” in the African American canon cannot come from classically inspired
verses unless they directly engage “racial” topics.\textsuperscript{27}

In contrast, I read Ray’s commemoration of Niobe’s grief as a counterpart to,
and comment on, the loss of the “Champions of Freedom” for whom she has written

\textsuperscript{26} See Walters 52 and Bennett 199.
\textsuperscript{27} Bennett calls “Niobe” Ray’s “greatest success,” both for its technical superiority
and, I suspect, for her reading of the sonnet as a memorial to grieving slave mothers
that echoes the preponderance of that trope in antebellum antislavery literature—a
poem that stands out from an array of Ray’s less “political” verses (200).
elegies. When considered alongside her elegies for Douglass, Garrison, Phillips, and Sumner, for example, Ray’s representation of Niobe’s losses (“One after one, one after one”) resembles the gradual loss of abolitionist heroes. As an aging generation passes away, Ray’s voice prints seek to preserve their memories for the revitalization of present and future activism. Similarly with her commemorations of Dunbar and Lincoln, who take their place alongside other named and unnamed losses, from known cultural icons to victims of racial violence under slavery and Jim Crow. Niobe’s grieving “mother-heart” serves as a familiar cultural analogy for mourning.

Tracey L. Walters interprets Ray’s “Niobe” as primarily a comment on the silencing or critique of African American women speaking in public forums, especially because the sonnet focuses on Niobe’s punishment: “Ray's omission of a crucial component of the story, Niobe's verbal assault [against Latona], indicates that Ray…wants her readers to focus solely on the idea that Niobe is a woman who is unfairly castigated and silenced by authority” (53). In highlighting the embedded voice prints of Niobe’s wailing and of Wheatley’s versification, I argue that Ray is not merely emphasizing the severity of Niobe’s punishment, as Walters suggests, but rather recovering the emotionally resonant mourning tones of Niobe’s lost voice, a voice capacious enough in Ray’s adaptation (and Wheatley’s) to commemorate losses beyond those of the mythological figure. Wheatley’s and Ray’s modern voices, in other words, anchor and preserve Niobe’s lost classical voice: African American women poets expand on Ovid’s representation of Niobe’s metamorphosis into silent stone and tears.
In Wheatley’s “Niobe in Distress,” just before her metamorphosis Niobe’s voice echoes through the “vocal hills,” prefiguring the queen’s own transformation into a weeping cliff:

One daughter lives, and she the least;  
The queen close clasp’d the daughter to her breast:  
‘Ye heav’nly pow’rs, ah spare me one,’ she cry’d,  
‘Ah! spare me one,’ the vocal hills reply’d… (ll. 207-210)

In Ray’s sonnet, the resonance of Niobe’s plea “Ah! spare me one” echoes through the speaker’s account of the death of Niobe’s children under Apollo’s and Artemis’s bows—“fast the arrows flew, / Like blinding lightning, smiting as they fell, / One after one, one after one”—and again in the speaker’s rhetorical question “Was it not well, / Avengers wroth, just one to spare?” Both Wheatley and Ray are, of course, reworking the most dramatic moment of Ovid’s account when Niobe pleads for the life of her last remaining daughter, “unam minimamque relinque [Leave this one, the smallest]” (Met. 6.299). The recovery of traces of Niobe’s wailing tones in Ray’s and Wheatley’s poems take their place alongside other revitalized voice prints in Ray’s literary excavations, from Douglass’s “matchless speech” to Malindy’s voice to the “[s]trange minor chords” offered up to the Muse.

In all of these examples of classical comparisons and recoveries, Ray’s poetic voice acts as a framing structure that encapsulates other, remembered voices. Her 1910 “Echo’s Complaint,” however, begins expressly with Echo’s voice (not set off by quotation marks), which continues in an extended soliloquy to Narcissus for eight of the nine total stanzas:

O rare Narcissus! sunny-haired!
O mild-eyed youth of godlike mien!
O thou that sittest by fair streams,
And in their trembling, silv’ry sheen
Thy lovely countenance dost view,
Turn but once more thy magic gaze
On one who utters sad complaint,
One who will love thee many days. (ll. 1-8)

In Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus, Echo’s only words reported verbatim are those she repeats back to Narcissus as she tries vainly to court his favor after Juno’s punishment, which renders her unable to choose her own words. Juno censures Echo’s tongue (lingua) with the following speech: “huius…linguae, qua sum delusa, potestas / parva tibi dabitur vocisque brevissimus usus” [You, tongue, by which I have been deluded, you shall be able to give back only a small part of what is given to you, exercising only the briefest amount of speech]” (Met. 6.366-367). Thus “resounding [resonabilis] Echo,” while still flesh and blood, echoes back the last words she hears, and it is in this manner that she courts Narcissus (Met. 6.358). When he senses somebody following him in the woods, he calls out “ecquis adest? [Is anyone there?]” and she responds “adest [She is here!],” and the exchange continues until she repeats back his “coeamus [Let’s get together!],” which she has interpreted in a sexual way, and runs out from her hiding place to try to embrace him (Met. 6.380 and 6.3.387).

Disgusted, vain Narcissus spurns her advances and in grief Echo wastes away until her bones turn to rock and only her echoing voice remains.

Ray’s poem changes the parameters of Echo’s courting of Narcissus by imagining what Echo might have said to Narcissus after his initial rejection had she had her full speech capacities. As Walters points out, “In Ray’s narrative, Echo does
not rely upon Narcissus to speak. She asserts her authority by speaking first and by choosing her own words” (55). By not limiting Echo to the “briefest amount of speech [vocis...brevissimus]” allotted her in the *Metamorphoses* as a punishment for her former ceaseless chattering, Ray reconstructs an eloquent and passionate address that nearly encompasses the entire poem—Echo’s voice thus blends closely with her own, not least because this portion of the poem is stylistically similar to Ray’s other love ballads such as “Rhyme of the Antique Forest” and “Anita and Giovanni,” both published in her 1910 volume.

In the final stanza, Echo’s speaking voice gives way suddenly—and without any change in punctuation or quotation marks—to a third-person speaker:

Thus wailed sad Echo: but to all
Her lamentation naught replied
Unmoved Narcissus; and the nymph,
Sweet Echo, thus in love sore tried,
Was seen no more; but on the breeze
Her voice was heard, her voice alone
Was left,—an answ’ring cadence there,
Love thrilling still its ling’ring tone. (ll. 65-72)

Here the “answ’ring cadence” and “ling’ring tone” remaining after Echo’s body has vanished is markedly different than her abundant speech in previous stanzas. While Ovid’s story contains two transformations (the truncation of Echo’s speech and her body’s gradual metamorphosis into stone), here Ray presents both as a single transformation resulting from Echo’s love-sick grief over Narcissus’s final rejection. This adaptation enables Echo to utilize her full speaking capacity during her courting of Narcissus: what in the *Metamorphoses* are only “echoed” phrases borrowed from Narcissus become full-blown poetic stanzas. But the insertion of the final stanza in
the third person describing Echo’s ultimate fate again reenacts the truncation of her speaking ability in Ovid’s text, leaving only the “answ’ring cadence” in stark contrast to the fullness of her speech in the first eight stanzas. In choosing this arrangement, Ray highlights her poem’s innovative foregrounding of Echo’s unchanged voice, and suggests that when her voice is reduced to an echo it is because of heartbreak, not Juno’s censoring of her lengthy chatter.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, remembering Ray for her conception of the possibilities of African American women’s poetry at the turn of the twentieth century is equally important as is tracing specific references to race in her poetry. As Walters points out, Ray’s openness to expressing romantic feelings and sexual desire in “Echo’s Complaint” is “quite radical” for her time: “By articulating the feelings most women could not openly express but surely felt, Ray demonstrates her own apparent unruliness” (57). She also performs a black classical adaptation that celebrates sexual desire—even if it does end in heartbreak—as a counterpoint to Niobe’s anguished grief, offering an example of literary recovery marked equally by hopeful anticipation as by mourning. Ray’s choice to adapt a love story from Ovid’s Metamorphoses is itself a calculated use of what was considered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a more risqué classical text because of its unabashed representation of sexual lust and “sensual gratification” (Thorn 235). One need only think back to the careful policing of viewers’ responses to Hiram Powers’s The Greek Slave at mid-century and the subsequent flourishing of “chaste” nude neoclassical sculptures to observe how the perceived sexual excesses of classical antiquity were
becoming more culturally visible even as they were kept in check by exaggerated representations of nineteenth-century feminine virtue and modesty. Ray’s adaptation of Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus cuts through the narrative of feminine modesty straight to the classical source, using Ovid’s original as an excuse for the sensual language.

Echo’s voice in Ray’s poem adopts the stylistic qualities of poems composed at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly those of others in Ray’s 1910 volume as suggested above. In looking back to the Echo of classical myth, Ray does not construct a persona limited to details within Ovid’s text or the brief sound bites allotted her, but one that reflects instead the flowery eloquence and romantic desires of many of Ray’s other speakers, well expressed in the iambic tetrameter common to ballads. The penultimate stanza, the last in Echo’s voice, is the most explicitly sensual:

‘Tis said I’m fair and love for thee
Will make me fairer, ay, as fair
As glorious Aphrodite, come
And let me kiss thy sunny hair,
Thy marble brow; ay, let me kiss
Thy dewy lips, thy peerless eyes.
One clasp from thee, one long love-clasp
Will change to joy-notes all my sighs. (ll. 57-64)

By contrasting Echo’s voice with the speaker’s voice of the final stanza (“Thus wailed sad Echo…”), which would be most closely associated with her own, Ray deflects accusations of excessive sensuality even as she uses the character of Echo as a mouthpiece for expressing sexual desire. Thus Echo’s soliloquy to Narcissus substitutes Ray’s voice back into classical myth, giving whole sentences to the
almost-silenced Echo, while Echo’s recovered voice—figured as Ovid’s creation—enables Ray to vocalize desires that might otherwise remain unspoken. In its sensual openness, Ray’s poem paves the way for the poetic developments starting to take place in African American women’s poetry just a few years later with the verses of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jesse Redmon Fauset, and others, for example Johnson’s 1918 publication of *The Heart of a Woman* and a decade later her signature poem “I Want to Die While You Love Me” in *An Autumn Love Cycle*.

“Echo’s Complaint” is just one of many poems by Ray that uses classical allusion to establish herself, a black woman, as an authoritative voice for African American experience and poetic potential. Each poem discussed in this chapter looks back as it looks forward, drawing from classical examples including sculpture, oratory, and poetry as authentic predecessors to nineteenth- and twentieth-century American and African American culture, and as temporally mobile referents that, working simultaneously through retrospection and prospection, help readers and listeners imagine alternative racial genealogies, communities, and futures. Two tropes have emerged in particular from Ray’s oeuvre, that of “excavating” the classical past and sources of poetic inspiration through recovered or faux-recovered objects such as the *Venus de Milo* or *Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii*, and that of revitalizing in poetry “voice prints” from historical and mythical persons, both classical and modern—a practice that facilitates canon-building and the synchronization of cultural memory, for example in Ray’s embedding of Malindy’s voice as a signifier for African American folk culture, and of her implied renderings
of prominent African American figures as modern-day Romans: Douglass as “Our Cicero,” Dunbar as repeating the stages of Vergil’s poetic career, and herself as female Ovid, adapting the myths of Niobe and Echo.

While the canon of African American writers that Ray develops in her classical/modern comparisons is predominantly male (Douglass and Dunbar), as is her catalog of abolitionist “Champions of Freedom,” the canon she anticipates by foregrounding the substratal voices of Malindy, Niobe, and Echo alongside Wheatley’s and her own serves to bring back the voices of women. The commemorative mode that Ray hones in her classically inspired poems resurfaces in women’s poetry of the Harlem Renaissance that explicitly names black women as literary and cultural predecessors worthy of commemoration, from Jessie Redmon Fauset’s “Oriflamme” published in 1920 in The Crisis, which with an epigraph from Sojourner Truth’s Narrative remembers Truth’s mother as a “Symbolic mother” grieving for her lost children, to Carrie Williams Clifford’s “To Phyllis Wheatley (First African Poetess),” published 1922, which remembers Wheatley as a “Dark Nightingale” whose singing “rivaled the clear morning song of the lark.” Neither Fauset’s nor Clifford’s poem mentions classical literature, but the references are present: Truth’s mother, “sitting, bowed and black, / Stricken and seared with slavery’s mortal scars, / Reft of her children,” echoes Niobe’s grieving form which both Wheatley and Ray had commemorated; and Clifford’s canonization of Wheatley as the “First African Poetess” cannot fail to call to mind the classical skill that made Wheatley so famous. In our own reflections on African American literary history, we
would do well to remember Cordelia Ray’s poetry as a crucial link between
nineteenth-century black classicism and oratory and twentieth-century black poets’
commemorations of race history.
EPILOGUE

Carrie Mae Weems, a contemporary African American photographer, recently held a residency at the American Academy in Rome during which she produced a series of large-scale black and white photographs picturing herself moving through the city and its environs. *Roaming* (2006) invites the viewer to consider the relationship between Weems’s body, clad in a plain black dress, and iconic vistas of Rome and its ancient past. Best known for work that foregrounds representations of African American women’s bodies in domestic and everyday scenes—like her *Kitchen Table* series (1990)—and in relation to histories of American visual media, Weems recollects reactions of puzzlement from acquaintances she met during her time in Rome. The casual question “What are you doing here?” took on added pointedness: “What are you doing *here*?” (Weems Lecture, Oct. 21, 2013). What has Rome to do with African American history or culture?

Weems’s photograph “The Edge of Time—Ancient Rome” [Figure 5.1] recreates the question and, perhaps, her answer. Weems, a lone female figure in black, stands in the foreground at the precipice of a stairwell leading down into a maze of houses and buildings whose Mediterranean clay roofs spill upwards to the peak of an adjoining city hill. Does she belong? Whose histories are imprinted here? Echoing her use of self-portrait in other work, here Weems presents her own body as the guide into Roman architecture and landscapes, “leading the viewer into those spaces highly aware,” she says, “and challenging those spaces, challenging them and marking them for what they are” (“Carrie Mae Weems”). Her recurring figure, like a
dark silhouette or cutout, evokes both physical presence and haunting absence: such a figure, a black woman, has rarely been included in the grand narrative of Roman art or cultural history. The photographs recall similar articulations of contested belonging by Cordelia Ray, Anna Julia Cooper, and their nineteenth-century contemporaries such as the African American neoclassical sculptor Edmonia Lewis, who spent much of her career in Rome, and Sojourner Truth, whose imagined image William Wetmore Story had crafted in his Roman studio in the form of *The Libyan Sibyl*. What, the same interlocutor might ask, are these African American women doing in the literal and figurative spaces of Rome’s classical legacy?
Nineteenth-century Americans often asked this question crudely and prohibitively, from naysayers deriding black students of Latin and Greek as imitative “parrots,” to Cooper’s actual dismissal from her post as principal of M Street High School because of her insistence on a classical curriculum. Truth, too, faced ridicule for the classical nickname she did not ask for, with one Kansas paper remarking, “It seems to us that Sojourner Truth is old enough and ugly enough by this time to commence prophesying.” But these black women faced down their detractors by figuring their classical rhetorical practices as equally “authentic” as those of their white contemporaries—that is to say, as authentic as any adaptation. Truth, in saying, “I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations,” declared a version of sibylline knowing. Ray, contemplating the sculpted contours of the Venus de Milo and the neoclassical Nydia, the Blind Girl of Pompeii, reclaimed the “splendor” of ancient Greece and the scene of Pompeians’ desperate flight from Vesuvius as black cultural inheritances, too, not least for the familiar lingering absences of unknowable pasts. Like Weems in Rome, nineteenth-century African Americans refigured “the classics” as a field open to continuing resignification, not as exclusive territory.

The same cultural reflexes are at work in Cooper’s use of Ciceronian rhetoric to argue for black women’s equality. Her poignant narration of the journey of “the black woman of the South” through Dixie in a segregated train car—like Weems’s navigation of Rome’s “edifice of power” through photographs—challenges the social hierarchies and violent histories embedded in the public architecture of Jim Crow America, as well as the cultural segregation of black women from the classics.
Figure 5.2. Carrie Mae Weems, “When and Where I Enter—Mussolini’s Rome” From Roaming (2006). Jack Shainman Gallery, New York City

(“Carrie Mae Weems”). The similarities between Weems’s and Cooper’s projects are not accidental: in another Roaming photograph, “When and Where I Enter—Mussolini’s Rome” [Figure 5.2], Weems redeploy Cooper’s most famous phrase to echo through the entire series, confronting both classical and modern imperial legacies with her own body and voice: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood…then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (31). Whether looking out from the balcony of an Italian film studio or gazing on iconic classical vistas, Weems re-embodies Cooper’s representative “black woman” as a kind of modern sibyl, a gatekeeper at “The Edge of Time,” looking forward by way of looking back.
“The abolitionists disclaim the ‘Greek slave’ as ‘too white for their philanthropy.’”


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