2019

WHERE WE BELONG: SPATIAL IMAGINING IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LIFE NARRATIVES, 1859-1912

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Digital Object Identifier: https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2019.094

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Recommended Citation
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WHERE WE BELONG:
SPATIAL IMAGINING IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LIFE NARRATIVES, 1859-1912

Where We Belong: Spatial Imagining in American Women’s Life Narratives, 1859-1912, studies three marginalized and disadvantaged American women’s self-life narratives during a transitional period in American history. In this dissertation, I am taking an interdisciplinary approach. Where We Belong borrows from social geography, new materialism, and autobiography studies in order to complicate critical discussions of women’s space and place in nineteenth-century women’s self-life narratives. Each chapter of Where We Belong presents a case study with the goal to provide a broader understanding of women’s strategies of belonging due to and despite their spatial exclusions. The overarching emphasis in each chapter remains on the female body’s spatial movement. Exploring Eliza Potter’s A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life (1859), Elizabeth Keckley’s Behind the Scenes; Or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (1868), and Mary Antin’s The Promised Land (1912), I claim that material spaces and these women’s corporeal bodies are inseparable. The three cases I present in this project exemplify how marginal women develop strategies of belonging in spaces from which they have been excluded. These women demonstrate ways of belonging (where they are assumed not to) enacted by self-life narratives. Belonging is not a passive way of being: it is activism that disrupts strict categories and definitions, such as blackness, in American literary scholarship. It contains paradoxes of acquiescence and self-declaration.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Belonging, Nineteenth-century, Women’s Writing, Spatiality

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04/18/2019
Date
WHERE WE BELONG:  
SPATIAL IMAGINING IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S LIFE NARRATIVES, 1859-1912  

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Guler Aybir, my guardian angel and eternal inspiration.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation benefited from the support, encouragement, patience, and guidance of several people. First, I am forever indebted to my chair Dr. Marion Rust for her intellectual generosity from the early stages of my dissertation to its completion. She is a true inspiration who continually challenged and encouraged my scholarship. Her brilliance and genuine investment in my academic success allowed me to grow as a scholar and complete this project on schedule.

Next, I would like to thank my complete Dissertation Committee: Dr. Pearl James, Dr. Rynetta Davis, and Dr. Anna Secor. They each provided insights that guided my thinking during different stages of my dissertation. I am thankful to Dr. Janet Eldred for some of the best and most practical writing advice I have received. I am grateful for the entire English Department, but especially Kristin Pickett and Robin Rahija for providing an exceptional administrative support. I also acknowledge my fellow graduate students at the University of Kentucky for many thought-provoking discussions that challenged my thinking, helping me as a friend, colleague, and scholar.

In addition to academic and technical guidance above, I received endless support and assistance from family and friends – both in the U.S. and Turkey. I owe my aunt, Asiye Ufuk, an immeasurable debt of gratitude. Her unconditional love and encouragement reached and comforted me across the ocean whenever I needed. To my husband, Ryan, I extend my deepest appreciation for his love, patience, and encouragement. Even during difficult times, he never stopped believing in me. I am grateful for every single individual who has been part of my journey. I hope I have made you proud.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: UNDERREPRESENTED BELONGING

But here, even as I stoop, stumble, and trudge my way forward, I begin to understand that beneath this piercing sun and breathtaking sky is exactly where I belong. Everything lies in front of me; nothing is behind.

Emily Bernard, Black is the Body

Even in its most stable ‘primordial’ forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations.

Nira Yuval-Davis, The Politics of Belonging

If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside.

Elspeth Probyn, Outside Belongings

Introduction: Situating Where We Belong

In 1859, a Cincinnati librarian annotated the title page of the first edition of Eliza Potter’s book (Figure 1). The adjective “colored,” handwritten in parentheses next to Potter’s name, identified the author primarily by her race. In a geography legally and ideologically determined by the lines of slavery in America (as Figure 2 demonstrates), this ink-mark on the title page signified racialized systems of classification and

Figure 1. Title Page of A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life. From The Public Library of Cincinnati. https://www.cincinnatilibrary.org/tallstacks/voices/potter01.html

In 1859, a Cincinnati librarian annotated the title page of the first edition of Eliza Potter’s book (Figure 1). The adjective “colored,” handwritten in parentheses next to Potter’s name, identified the author primarily by her race. In a geography legally and ideologically determined by the lines of slavery in America (as Figure 2 demonstrates), this ink-mark on the title page signified racialized systems of classification and
arrangement adopted by the Cincinnati library. In 1859, cultural connotations of the archaic term assigned to Potter were built on the foundations of the institution of slavery. Yet, Potter was a free-born black woman. This seemingly minor status-detail about an exceptional story of a nineteenth-century hairdresser/autobiographer, juxtaposed with the librarian’s annotation, captured my academic curiosity and planted the seeds of Where We Belong. What does it mean, I asked, to be a free black woman writer in slavery America? How and where do marginalized American women belong when belonging is not a privilege but social survival? Inquiring into the lived experiences of Potter and consecutive generations of women on the margins, I explored the intersection of sociopolitical, geographical, and literary landscapes vis-à-vis written (and published) self-

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1 As Laura E. Helton notes in her most recent article (2019), “the history of information is of increasing interest to scholars of literacy” (102). In her sophisticated study, Helton discusses the groundbreaking work of librarian and curator Dorothy Porter who, in the first half of the twentieth century, fought against the Dewey Decimal Classification of late nineteenth century. Helton underlines that “blackness occupied a marginalized place in this system” (103). See Helton’s article “On Decimals, Catalogs, and Racial Imaginaries of Reading” for a detailed discussion of the system and Porter’s revisionist work.
expressions of exceptional women who occupy outsider inside positions within their narratives.

Where We Belong studies three marginalized and disadvantaged women – Eliza Potter (1820-1893), Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907), and Mary Antin (1881-1949) – within a historical window of five decades between 1859 and 1912. Where We Belong investigates the nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century spatiality of American women exclusively, but the larger inquiry of this project aims to understand how women engage space in their self-life narratives in different historical contexts and with different technologies. I am specifically interested in exploring how women develop a sense of belonging in environments that historically and presumably excluded or subordinated women. Although my project is organized chronologically, it is not making a linear historical argument. The emphasis, instead, is on patterns of spatial structures.  

2 For decades, critical conversations about nineteenth-century American women’s writing have made abundant use of spatial metaphors, most remarkably with the notion of “separate spheres.” Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, separate spheres, as a metaphor and ideology, dominated inquiries about women, anchored in home-space that has traditionally been conceptualized in opposition to public space. (See Linda Kerber’s “Separate Spheres,” for an elaborate historical narrative of the phrase.) A convenient yet misleading term, separate spheres has been studied and challenged by contemporary scholars of women’s culture and literature. Building on the same lines of thought with scholars such as Mary Ryan and Nina Baym, Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould highlight, “the terms of criticism have shifted…where we had once imagined women in the private sphere, social historians have more recently identified the intersubjectivity of citizens and the interpenetrating realms of home and work” (5). Today, the convenience of the term is largely replaced by critical skepticism. Scholars such as Cathy Davidson and Jassmyn Hatcher, in their introduction to No More Separate Spheres (2002), argue against studies which “insist that not only was nineteenth century American society organized around the model of separate spheres but also that the female sphere of sentiment, home, and hearth suddenly became a source of great national value, pride and inspiration” (Davidson 7). Correspondingly, Amy G. Richter summarizes in Home on Rails (2005): “the line between public and private has become so blurry that the dichotomy has lost all explanatory power” (Richter 6). The separate spheres metaphor has largely been dismissed from critical discussions.

3 I use the terms space and spatiality in my chapters to emphasize material and intangible qualities that inherently tie subjects and concepts to physical dimensions and temporality. Spatiality, most fundamentally, means “caused or involved by space” (“Spatiality, adj”). And I follow Doreen Massey’s definition of space as open – not bounded, fixed or static: “space can never be that complete simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established…A space, then, which is neither a container for always-ready constituted identities nor a completed closure of holism…For the future to be open, space must be open too”
Where We Belong inquires into the historical question of belonging: Where did these exceptional (and unlikely) autobiographer women belong – geographically, socially and literally? This fundamental question productively ties to a timeless exploration: Where do these women belong now – literally and figuratively?

I am specifically interested in this time period because of its social and political changes in the United States that directly impacted women, individually and collectively. These key historical moments include the Dred Scott decision of 1857 (two years before the publication of one of my key texts, Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* [1859]), the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and 1875 (the latter aimed against public transportation and courtroom injustices African Americans faced), growing numbers of immigrant populations due to high demands of labor in industrialized urban areas, and improvements in women’s education and women’s rights.4 As Alison Piepmeier summarizes,

[t]his was in many ways a time of national turmoil...America’s identity as a nation was formed and reformed, with increasing expansion of cities and growth of immigrant populations...During this time the publishing world was revolutionized, and women’s involvement played a huge role in this. (13)

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(Massey 11-12). Spatiality, as an interdisciplinary concept, is not a novel area of scholarly interest. Yet, a significant “spatial turn,” as Robert Tally phrases, has been recognized “in literary and cultural studies (if not arts and sciences more generally) …in recent years” (Tally 11-12).

4 Towards the end of the nineteenth century, cities rapidly grew as industrial centers. Urban areas attracted national and international workers. As Roark summarizes, “[m]ore than 25 million immigrants came to the United States between 1850 and 1920...The ‘new’ immigration resulted from a number of factors. Improved economic conditions in western Europe…the persecution of Jews in eastern Europe, and a general desire to avoid conscription into the Russian army led many people from southern and eastern Europe to move to the United States. The need of America’s industries for cheap, unskilled labor during prosperous years also stimulated immigration” (605-606).
Technological improvements, especially in transportation and printing, played an important role in underrepresented women’s lives during this time. More specifically for instance, the American railroads revised meanings and practices of women’s physical mobility. Eliza Potter’s trips between Saratoga and Cincinnati as well as Elizabeth Keckley’s travels between Washington and New York exemplify these single women’s bodily movements across this landscape. The key events above highlight changes that especially impacted lives of disadvantaged populations. For instance, court decisions such as Dred Scott that denied freedom and citizenship rights to populations on racial premises had immediate consequences for free black women like Eliza Potter; changing meanings and continuing challenges of independence in post-slavery America impacted Elizabeth Keckley’s life and publication in the midst of the Reconstruction; respectively, two decades later, urban slums of Boston shaped Mary Antin’s American life and identity.

In *Where We Belong*, I am taking an interdisciplinary approach: I borrow from new materialism and autobiography studies in order to complicate critical discussions of marginalized women. Correspondingly, in the following pages, I define each key term – belonging, new materialism and self-life narrative/autobiography (in this order) – and explain how they productively intersect in my dissertation. This critical intersection provides the foundation for my central argument: Belonging, for the three marginalized women I study, is a form of activism that contains paradoxes of acquiescence and self-declaration enacted by self-life narratives.5

5 Following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, I will be using “life writing” and “life narrative” interchangeably in this project – instead of the more popular term “autobiography”: “Autobiography...became the term for a particular generic practice that emerged in the West...the term privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing” (2-3). Smith and Watson prefer “life writing” and “life narrative” for being “more inclusive of the heterogeneity practices” (4). “Autobiographical,” as an adjective, different than the noun, stands for and is used to “designate self-referential writing” (4).
New Materialist Belonging and Autobiographical Narrative

One word of warning to prospective autobiographers: if you enjoy remembering things, don’t put your memories on paper. If you do, you will never remember any more: you will know, but never more remember.

Mary Antin, “How I Wrote The Promised Land”

The three autobiographers I study – Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckley, and Mary Antin – demonstrate elements of belonging where they are assumed not to. Belonging contains ever-changing social relations and their material premises. My analysis of belonging, as a concept invoking both tangible and immaterial realities, follows Yuval-Davis’s discussion of belonging to different social identities (such as gender, age, or race). According to Yuval-Davis, in this context, “what is being talked about are social and economic locations, which, at each historical moment, have particular implications vis-à-vis the grids of power relations in society” (119). In a similar vein, Marco Antonsich emphasizes the affective aspects of belonging “as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (644). As these examples demonstrate, belonging has gained interdisciplinary popularity in recent years. In addition to studies by Yuval-Davis and Antonsich, Leonie Cornips and Vincent Rooij explore belonging and language. Cornips and Rooij aptly state:

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6 My use of the term belonging differs from un-belonging in the sense that the latter connotes a more direct political resistance in action. For example, see Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s commentary on Mab Segrest in “Belonging: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation”: Rowe analyzes un-belonging of Segrest as “a vehicle for her to resist the hegemonic pull of white Southern modes of belonging” (Rowe 39). In contrast, belonging for the marginalized women I study embodies paradoxes of acquiescence and resistance simultaneously.

7 In her article, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” Yuval-Davis outlines three essential analytical degrees of belonging: “social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values” (197).
feelings of belonging are best seen not as simply enduring through time and space, but as changing and variable across situations and stages of life. People develop feelings of belonging in social interaction by engaging with semiotic resources such as physical space, material culture (including built-up environment), and linguistic features. (Cornips 2)

While *Where We Belong* does not study linguistic elements specifically, I value the corresponding emphasis on materialities and affect in their work. While my discussion of belonging follows their line of thought, it is important to note the nuanced perspective necessary to understand the three marginalized women I study: these women do not have the privilege to choose or “feel” where they belong. Correspondingly, my use of the term belonging embodies complexities of social experiences within their historical temporalities: belonging is not fixed or static but relational and changing.

New materialism plays an important role in conceptualizing belonging as anchored in physical and abstract relations. New materialism brings a timely attention to material details in social ecologies. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost outline the historical genealogy of this interdisciplinary theoretical ground. They draw attention to materialist legacies of nineteenth-century studies, but, more importantly, they highlight early critical materialist roots to show the new materialist deviation:

Many of our ideas about materiality in fact remain indebted to Descartes, who defined matter in the seventeenth century as corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform and inert. This provided the basis for modern ideas of nature as quantifiable and measurable…According to this model, material objects are identifiably discrete; they move upon an encounter with
an external force or agent, and they do so according to a linear logic of cause and
effect. (Coole 7)

While attention to material elements, as Coole and Frost underline, is not a novel area of
critical interest, new materialism differs from traditional materialism in its embrace of
instability and non-linearity. Jane Bennett, for instance, positions herself as a new
materialist in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). Her line of thought
borrows from earlier traditions that established grounds for matter as “corporeal
substance,” but also diverges significantly (Coole 7). For instance, the way her materialism
is different than Marxist materialism is that Marxism focuses on human social construction.
Accordingly, things/objects do not have much agency unless the proletariat unite. On the
other hand, what Bennett describes as “thing-power” does not need a human subject to be an “actant”: “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items
to exceed their status as objects…a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing
formerly known as an object” (Bennett xvi). Bennett not only argues against hierarchical
power of humans over objects but also against the idea of human-centered individualism.
Accordingly, this line of thought helps conceptualize human agency in an egalitarian
interrelation with organic or inorganic elements alike. Within the narratives I explore in
*Where We Belong*, women re-script their corporeal experiences in retrospect. Those bodily
experiences are anchored in material relations within particular socio-geographical
locations.

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8 To illustrate, Bennett unpacks the production of her book within this theoretical framework: “The sentences
of this book also emerged from the confederate agency of many striving micro-and microactants: from ‘my’
memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic
computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window…What is at work here on the page is an animal-
vegetable-mineral-sonority cluster with a particular degree and duration of power” (23).
To demonstrate new materialist belonging in action, I will offer a distinct example. Sometime between the years 1840 and 1859, Eliza Potter took a train ride from Saratoga, NY to Cincinnati (where she resided). As a solo black female traveler against all odds of her era, she comfortably seated herself in a train car. This train ride Potter reflects upon in her self-life narrative highlights noncognitive relations between her racialized female body, her veiled face, and the train car where she is seated right behind two (white) familiar ladies (Chapter Two, “Traces of Eliza Potter”). Potter, a free, single, black hairdresser traveling by herself in antebellum America, occupies a racially coded seat in a train car; she wears a veil that signifies gendered social practices. In this moment, Potter covers her face with the veil, which allows her to listen to the conversation between the two women. Hidden in plain sight, she actively shapes the situation, both by listening to a conversation not meant for her ears and by documenting her experience in writing. Her black body is not ignored or restricted in this moment. Instead, Potter is able to choose invisibility and immobility. In an era when black women were deprived of fundamental human rights under the institution of slavery, Potter’s agency is exceptionally powerful. Studying Potter through her autobiographical expressions of spatial strategies, I claim that, in this example, her agency can be conceptualized only by inquiring into the dynamic material-immaterial interplay that includes Potter’s physical body in the train, her seat, her veil covering her face, the physical movement of the railroads, and her racialized identity. As this example

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9 It is important to understand the racial tensions and consequences of the historical moment for a black female body. I find Amy Richter’s extensive research of the intersection of the American womanhood and the railroad development in the country to be very helpful in understanding Potter’s exceptional mobility as a free black woman. According to Richter, being a black traveler was a challenging experience even towards the end of the century: “Even black ladies and gentlemen who could afford a first-class ticket...were often turned away” (111). William and Ellen Craft in their exceptional story of escape from slavery in Georgia in 1848 (Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom [1860]) express difficulties (if not impossibilities) of traveling as a black individual unaccompanied by a white person (often a slave owner).
illustrates, reading material encounters allows me to explain affective complexities of marginalized women’s belonging accessed through their self-life narratives.

*Where We Belong* privileges autobiographical narratives because the genre (in its malleability) allows women to revisit and re-create their lived (and remembered) experiences. Self-life narratives also provide a literary site for these women to (re)construct an autobiographical self, which, as Smith and Watson emphasize, is inherently incoherent, relational, and unstable (55).\(^{10}\) While representations of historical people and places play an important role in how we read autobiographical texts, I am more interested in the three autobiographers’ self-expressions within their literarily represented environments.\(^{11}\) To tell their own stories, these women also tell stories of others. In the case of Elizabeth Keckley, for instance, the narrative appears twofold: *Behind the Scenes* can be considered both a biography of Mary Lincoln and the autobiography of Elizabeth Keckley.\(^{12}\)

Autobiographical identity is relational and unstable, and this identity is in constant becoming within corporeal (blood and flesh) bodies. An autobiographer’s “sense of identity,” as John Eakin puts it, “is shaped by our lives in and as bodies” (x). According to Eakin, when an autobiographer writes the “I” to tell their story, “we do not invent our identities out of whole cloth. Instead, we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit

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\(^{10}\) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss autobiographical self in life narratives. They aptly state that “readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. For there is no coherent ‘self’ that predates stories about identity, about ‘who’ one is. Nor is there a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences” (55).

\(^{11}\) As Barbara Caine states, “most historians now read these autobiographies for what they reveal about the beliefs, ideas and subjectivity of their authors, and for the insight they offer into how people saw and understood themselves in their worlds...they are interested in understanding how or why an individual might have seen an event in a particular way” (74-75).

\(^{12}\) Due to this observed genre-blending quality of the work, I refer to *Behind the Scenes* as auto/biography or auto/biographical narrative in Chapter three of this dissertation.
to shape them, resources that specify what it means to be a man, a woman, a worker, a person in the settings where we live our lives” (22). Eakin’s sophisticated argument emphasizes the inextricable relationship between the human body and intangible elements of social sites. I would also add material social relations, as part of cultural inhabitance of bodies, to this equation. That is, geographical locations play an inherently equal role in autobiographical representations of identity rooted in the human body.

“That body,” as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson emphasize, “is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge (a textual surface on which a person’s experience is inscribed) because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects” (49). This embodiment Smith and Watson explore is one of the key theoretical elements of the genre that makes autobiographical texts ideal for an investigation of new materialist belonging of marginalized nineteenth-century women.

While the self-life narratives I study are published as complete texts with a beginning and an end (however unconventional at times), the printed product is not a representative of unity and coherence of the narratable self. In agreement with Eakin, Smith and Watson write, “there is no coherent ‘self’ that predates stories about identity, about ‘who’ one is. Nor there is a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past” (61). In Reading Narratives, Adriana Cavarero argues along the same lines: she identifies the autobiographer as both the subject and object of the narrative. The autobiographical self, Cavarero argues, accesses the birth narrative – which makes the self-identity concept complete – only externally. In order to write the autobiographical story of the self, one relies on others’ stories (fragments) of the
individual’s origins. “Identity,” therefore, “depends upon the presence of others” (Cavarero 21). Every person desires to know their narratable story, according to Cavarero. And, she defines autobiography (the story of the self) as “a mistake of desire” (Cavarero 84). Writing a self-life narrative is not, therefore, a coherent process that produces a complete product. As Cavarero summarizes, “[t]o tell one’s own story is to distance oneself from oneself, to double oneself, to make oneself an other” (84). Building on these foundations of inherent fragments of the narratable self and the physical body, the critical lens of belonging allows the productive exploration of material encounters and fluid identities through autobiographical imaginations.

**Chapter Summaries**

Each chapter of *Where We Belong* focuses on a different type of female spatiality in three unconventional authors’ self-life narratives between 1859 and 1912. I present three case studies with the goal of providing a broader understanding of marginalized American women due to and despite spatial exclusions. To accomplish this goal, each chapter analyzes (in this order) the autobiographical narrator, the published book, and the circulation of the book in direct relation to each woman’s spatial strategies for belonging where they are assumed not to.

The analytical lens of belonging anchors the overarching emphasis on the female body, which is “not fixed and limited with the blood and flesh” (Blackman 10).¹³ The second chapter inquires into capacities of belonging for Eliza Potter, a black, female, narratable self in antebellum United States, beyond rigid definitions of blackness in the nineteenth century. These limiting interpretations, in part imposed by dominant scholarly

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¹³ See Lisa Blackman’s sophisticated study *The Body* for a detailed discussion.
criticism, indicate a black literary tradition that largely excludes women such as Potter. Chapter three studies the material and semantic spatiality of the book to show Elizabeth Keckley’s precarious freedom after the Civil War. Finally, the last chapter focuses on Mary Antin’s immigrant female body as written, published, and circulated at the turn of the century.

The second chapter, “Traces of Eliza Potter,” discusses Eliza Potter’s representations of space and place in *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (1859). It aims to understand patterns of her bodily movements read through the autobiographical narrator. Biographical evidence about Potter’s life-details are minimal. Scholars’ knowledge about her is largely limited to her self-expressions in the narrative. Potter was a free African American woman from New York. She moved to Cincinnati after ending her marriage. In Cincinnati, she built a successful career as a hairdresser and travelled to seasonal destinations, such as Saratoga, NY, to style her elite clients’ hair. Her professional engagements helped her gather content material for her controversial publication. Unlike many of her contemporaries, such as Harriet Jacobs or Harriet E. Wilson, Potter’s story does not begin with slavery. In fact, Potter does not even overtly identify as a black woman in antebellum United States. Against all odds, Potter, as a free-born black woman, demonstrates self-claimed privilege to choose her own geographical path through the narrative. At the core of this chapter lies Potter’s unfixed relationship with places (she travels to and resides in) that reveal the disruptive capacities of belonging through the

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14 Published under her penname Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), traces her life story from her years in slavery to her hiding years in a garret and eventual escape to Northern states (Jacobs). Harriet E. Wilson, in her fictionalized narrative, *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), respectively tells Frado’s (representing Wilson in the narrative) story as a black girl in the North in antebellum America (Wilson).
narrative. In the narrative, Potter conditionally occupies a unique position in social spaces as a non-member participant. As an outsider inside exclusive circles, Potter embodies productive paradoxes, such as visibility and invisibility, mobility and stability. Her uncommon belonging (however fluid and precarious) occurs due to and despite socio-spatial boundaries she actively challenges.

Chapter Three, “Thirty Years but Four Chapters a Slave: Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes,*” studies Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave: Four Years in the White House* (1868). Keckley was born a slave in Virginia in 1818. A single mother, Keckley improved her sewing skills and began offering services to her community in the south during her thirty years in slavery. After raising enough money, Keckley and her son George purchased their freedom in 1855. Keckley moved to Washington DC where she began working as Mary Lincoln’s seamstress. Keckley made the First Lady’s dresses for the most important public appearances of the time. The two remained in close contact even after President Lincoln’s assassination. Keckley was involved in Mrs. Lincoln’s infamous scandal, about which she writes in *Behind the Scenes.* While the second chapter focuses on the spatiality of the autobiographical persona, Chapter Three studies the spatiality of the book in direct relation to Keckley’s elements of belonging. The printed book, which follows genre conventions with chapters, page layout with margins, a cover, etc., creates a tangible space. Keckley’s belonging and spatial elements of *Behind the Scenes* remain inseparable, as I argue in that chapter.

Chapter Four, “‘At Home in an Alien World’: Mary Antin’s Promised Land,” examines autobiographical self-representations of Mary Antin, a Jewish-Russian immigrant woman at the turn of the twentieth century. Born in Russia in 1881, Mary Antin
emigrated to the United States at the age of thirteen. Antin started public school in Massachusetts where she distinguished herself as an academically talented student with strong interest in language. While still in school, she published her first work, “Snow,” in the school journal with the help of her teacher. She is most recognized for her autobiographical book-length publication, *The Promised Land* (1912). While the second and third chapters focus respectively on the narratable self and the spatiality of the book, this chapter analyzes the circulation of Antin’s *The Promised Land* in direct relation to Antin’s geographical, national, and literary belonging. While there are several other self-life narratives written by what we would consider marginalized and disadvantaged women in the decades following *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* and *Behind the Scenes*, I specifically choose to study Antin’s *The Promised Land* because Antin brings attention to what it means to claim American citizenship and identity when the country opened its doors to immigrants – especially from Russia and Europe – at the turn of the century. Reading *The Promised Land* vis-à-vis the other two exceptional black women’s narratives demonstrates how racialized patterns and boundaries emerge through diverse American women’s literary self-expressions.
CHAPTER TWO

TRACES OF ELIZA POTTER

Oh! If tessellated hearts and satin tapestries could speak, what tales of agony they might tell! If the marble statues that adorn the riches of the lordly mansions could open their mouths, how would they outrival all poetry and romance in the incidents they could proclaim.

Eliza Potter

Resistance, yes, but other capacities too. Like quiet.

Kevin Quashie

Introduction

A single mother of two children, Eliza Potter led an extraordinarily free, wealthy, and independent life as a legally classified mulatto in mid-nineteenth-century Cincinnati. She gained unprecedented popularity as a hairdresser among high-society members of that city. In fact, as Nikki M. Taylor highlights in her detailed study of Cincinnati’s black community between 1802 and 1868, “Potter was one of only four black female hairdressers in Cincinnati. In a city where the top three professions for black women in 1860 were washerwoman (46 percent), servant (17 percent), and seamstress (almost 13 percent), Potter was an exception” (135). And her unique success story, unlike many of her contemporaries’ published narratives, did not begin in the slave cabin. As a free-born black woman who moved to Cincinnati from New York in the 1840s, Potter had a self-claimed privilege to choose her own geographical path. Unlike many black people of the south, Potter’s race, evident in her narrative, did not tie her to people and places permanently: she traveled widely across the United States as well as countries around the world, including Canada, France and England, with families that employed her for domestic work.

15 Nikki M. Taylor writes: “Potter's two children, Kate and James, had been born in Pennsylvania in 1849 and 1851 respectively, possibly the offspring of a marriage toward which she harbored deep resentment” (135-136).
Contrary to literary patterns of antebellum African-American and African-American women’s literature, Potter’s self-life narrative, *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (1859), is not an up-from-slavery story. In fact, even though historical evidence indicates that her African-American heritage was well-known and recorded, Potter’s autobiographical narrator does not even overtly identify as black in any part of the narrative. In this chapter, I explore Potter’s unique literary work that challenges not only dominant genre categories but also limiting identity definitions of a black autobiographer woman in the nineteenth century. In the following pages, I present an alternative method of reading *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* that will challenge dominant scholarship and allow researchers to understand the significance of Potter, a historically marginalized and understudied African-American woman. I argue that investigating elements and strategies of belonging in Potter’s exceptional story productively challenges definitions of blackness rigidly rooted in racialized rhetoric of resistance in the nineteenth century and beyond. I argue for Potter’s vibrant capacity of belonging that embraces a paradoxical understanding of movement and stability. That is, movement (both material and abstract), as Potter demonstrates, is integral to her belonging, which is not a passive way of being; it is active and constant.

Due to her need and desire to establish financial security, Potter starts working “at an early age” (Potter 3). Even before she takes up hairdressing as a long-term career, she is a traveler due to and despite her labor. That is, she travels to different locations with

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16 The Cincinnati-library copy of the book, as I discuss in the first chapter, can also be considered as strong evidence for her public identity as a black woman (Figure 1). I further explore this aspect in the following pages.

17 In this chapter, I will be referring to the 2009 edition of Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*.

18 See Xiomara Santamarina’s detailed discussion of nineteenth-century African American women’s labor in *Belabored Professions*. She dedicates a sophisticated chapter to Potter in this important study.
her clients and practices unlikely physical mobility for a working-class woman. As a maid/nurse for a midwestern family, Potter finds temporary employment in Cincinnati during her first time in that city. This is the place she resides in later years and claims as “home.” Her early days in Cincinnati end miserably with her deportation upon helping a slave run away by sharing information about an escape route to Canada. Exiled from the city, Potter spends three months in jail. After regaining her freedom, she seeks new employment in Indiana, Washington, and New York. With a family that employs her as a nurse, she travels to France and England. Potter’s interest in styling hair becomes a professional practice around this time in Europe. Prior to styling hair, she experiments with nursing, flower-making, sewing, and cooking, but she gets tired of these easily. Potter admits that only hairdressing attracts her sustainable attention as a professional investment. Coming back to America, she gradually gains popularity as a successful hairdresser. She spends several seasons in Saratoga, New York, as a well-known hair stylist for wealthy wives and daughters in higher-class circles. During this time, she establishes permanent residence in Cincinnati and continues to travel, pursuing elite clients both in northern and southern states.

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19 Years after her initial exile, Potter comes back to Cincinnati not as a domestic worker traveling with an employer, but as an entrepreneurial resident and property-owner “on Home Street in the upscale Fourteenth Ward” who now chooses her home, neighbors, and clients (Taylor 135).
20 While Potter does not offer a direct explanation for her career decision, the following lines suggest that she considers hairdressing a comparatively exciting and lucrative investment of her time and money. Potter writes: “I became so weary of my monotonous duties [as a maid], that I concluded to quit my place and learn the art of flower-making…though I soon grew tired of it, and thought I should like dress-making; but, after short trial, finding that did not suit me, I took a notion to learn cooking, but soon gave that also up [sic]. Nothing but hair-dressing pleased my fancy for any length of time” (12).
21 According to Santamarina, “Potter’s ‘exile’ from Cincinnati appears to have lasted two or even three years” (xvi). Potter underlines her coming back to Cincinnati with confidence. She mentions her local business connections for evidence: “since the time I mentioned as having settled down in Cincinnati, I have dressed one hundred and fifty brides; twenty-five of these were in Louisville, KY and some seven or eight in Covington and Newport, just across the river from Cincinnati” (85).
Potter’s desired and earned rootedness in Cincinnati strengthens her mobility and agency. She makes Cincinnati her home while choosing new destinations for work and travel.\textsuperscript{22} Although details about the author’s life are highly elusive in the book, Potter’s relationship with Cincinnati, central to the narrative, productively disrupts limiting categories of blackness and movement.\textsuperscript{23} I argue that Potter’s precarious relationship with Cincinnati shows disruptive capacities of belonging. Potter’s writing repositions her body and identity within that city from which she once was exiled. Back in Cincinnati, narrating her journeys, Potter now recalls and records sketches from her life “under [her] vine and fig tree”: she transforms her public self from a prisoner/exile to a property owner, fashion authority and social critic of Cincinnati (7).

When Eliza Potter published her largely scandalous autobiographical narrative in 1859, she was residing in Cincinnati. As historical records indicate, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed rapid economic growth in this city. Nikki M. Taylor states that during this time, “[t]he city…became the leading supplier of manufactured goods for most of the South and the West, earning the reputation of ‘Queen City of the West.’ People seeking jobs and other economic opportunities left the Northeast and upper South and flocked to Cincinnati in this era of prosperity” (1). In this changing landscape, Potter and her publication stand out as exceptional, especially considering antebellum circumstances affecting lives of African American populations in Cincinnati. Loren Schweninger’s study

\textsuperscript{22} As I later explore, she can afford to lose a suitcase in a train car fire so long as the rest of her valuable items remain secure at home in Cincinnati. Correspondingly, she stands up in confidence for her right to demand respectful treatment and compensation for her material loss because she has evidence of her rich wardrobe in her residence and friends who can testify.

\textsuperscript{23} I discuss this relationship in detail later in this chapter.
of black property ownership between 1790 and 1915 shows corresponding challenges of being black and free in the nineteenth century:

According to a local survey, among the 1,129 former slaves in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1839, 476, or 42 percent, had purchased themselves. They paid a total of $215,522, or an average of $453 each...almost 20 percent of the local black population had been freed through purchase by blacks or self-purchase. Usually in their thirties, they tended to be artisans, cooks, servants, or barbers if men, and laundresses if women. (65-66)

This data puts Potter’s socio-economic success into perspective – not because of her entrepreneurial career as a hairdresser but because of her financially privileged position compared to a large black population in Cincinnati. She did not face “[t]he economic burdens of self-purchase, and its subsequent effects on earning power and property accumulation,” for instance (Schweninger 66). She was a black property-owner in a dominantly white neighborhood. More specifically, as Taylor notes, “she resided on Home Street in the upscale Fourteenth Ward and owned two thousand dollars’ worth of real estate and four hundred dollars in personal property” (135-136). Unlike the majority of the black population in Cincinnati (and the South, more generally), Potter, a property-owner entrepreneurial woman, established her financial security.

Yet, it was not her economic success but her professional achievements (and network) that undoubtedly provided the publishing opportunity for Potter. As the narrative demonstrates, through her skilled labor, she builds her clientele, gathers information about people and places, and secures an audience, presumably white and higher-class Cincinnati residents, who would be interested in finding out about incidents a hairdresser has privilege
to witness behind the scenes. Her profitable business endeavors provide authorship opportunities and privileges for Potter. Her work exposes her discoveries in intimate settings where Potter’s elite customers can evidently be the most vulnerable and unguarded.

**Questions of Where**

The ways *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* bends conventional social and literary rules challenge both nineteenth-century and twenty-first century audiences. As several scholars have noted on autobiographical traditions of women, African American women’s self-life narratives in the nineteenth century do not fit under preceding categories of autobiographical writing of white middle-class women. On the subject, Nellie Y. McKay notes: “challenging white hegemony, black autobiographers used narrative to fight their battle against chattel slavery and to engage in the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people” (96). Unlike texts such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), however, Potter’s narrative does not challenge political currents of the country by claiming the voice of the oppressed. While the book shares commonalities with other nineteenth-century black American women’s life narratives, *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* cannot be considered representative of black woman’s autobiographical traditions.

Potter’s work challenges ideas about reading and defining blackness rooted in racialized womanhood that emerges from mistaken assumptions of common biosocial and

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24 As Santamarina notes, “Potter offers insights into black authors’ diverse experiences and the ways in which these experiences contradict our expectations of a unitary ‘black’ subject and of racially ‘representative’ texts. The form and content of *A Hairdresser’s Experience* offers new perspectives on the nineteenth century emergency of African American autobiography” (xii-xiii).
biopolitical patterns of black womanhood. Underlining the significance of reading and researching black women’s autobiographical creations in her highly credited study, *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989), Joanne M. Braxton argues that the tradition [of black woman’s autobiography] exists because of the commonality of the black woman’s experience...because of the uniquely Afra-American culture and consciousness that emerge from this experience. After all, autobiography, perhaps more than any other literary genre, is a form of symbolic memory, a confluence of culture and consciousness. (208)

Although Potter is a black woman autobiographer in the nineteenth century, her work does not follow such conservative readings of the genre. Her experiences as an exceptionally successful entrepreneurial black woman who does not write with an abolitionist (or any other overtly political) agenda place her on the margins of exclusive and dominant definitions of black women's writing.

Potter’s writing offers new ways of reading belonging for a published black woman in mid-nineteenth-century America. The book inherently falls outside existing literary categories of its time. But, like the author herself, her work can be understood as occupying the margins and the center simultaneously. Although the text animates conventional autobiographical elements, Potter’s narrative diverges from rigid genre expectations of self-life narrative: *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* borrows significantly from travel narrative, for instance. American travel narrative (or the road narrative) has been a

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25 Alexander Weheliye offers a detailed discussion of race and biopolitics in her most recent work. She provides a sophisticated argument that is concerned with “alternate ways of conceptualizing the place of race, or racializing assemblages, within the dominion of modern politics” (1).

26 Smith and Watson offer a broad definition of the genre as a subcategory of life narrative: “Travel narratives have a long history, extending the West back to the Greeks and Romans and employed by travelers in Arabic and Chinese lands long before the printing press. Travel narratives are usually written in the first person and focus, in progress or retrospectively on a journey” (284).
genre that explores the quintessential American subject and authentic American experience
in the New World. As Ann Brigham underlines,

[t]he American, or perhaps more accurately, the Euro-American, national
imaginary has been profoundly shaped by the premise of mobility: the freedom to
go anywhere and become anyone. The road trip epitomizes the linkage between the
two: spatial mobility – the movement between places or across a space – has often
been understood as a way to achieve a range of other mobilities, from the social
and economic to the psychological and sexual. (3)

The road-narrative elements I read in *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*, therefore,
include material and intangible movement/mobility. Potter places emphasis on the
spatial/geographical journey as well as her social and economic movement that eventually
makes Potter her elite clients’ confidante and property-owning neighbor.27

Potter organizes her travels nonlinearly in *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*:
the chronological order of incidents she logs is distinctively difficult to grasp. She explains
directly to the reader that some events “were all written long after they occurred, and in the
order in which they presented themselves to [her] memory” (84). As she focuses on spatial
(dis)organization in the narrative, she embraces the chaotic memory and admittedly
disregards chronological sequence of events recreated. The narrative lacks a conventional
plot line with a beginning and a conclusion. Her story begins in medias res and ends with
no resolution.

Potter follows a spatial organizing principle: the chapter titles, such as “Saratoga,”
“Natches,” and “Cincinnati,” present geographical locations as patterns in the book. And,

27 Santamarina discusses Potter’s profession as a hairdresser in detail in *Belabored Professions.*
she describes this organizational nonlinearity as “somewhat rambling and desultory” (3). She does not adopt a temporal structure in the narrative: as she moves in and out of spaces, the reader loses track of time and sequence of her recorded experiences. For instance, she devotes one of her earlier chapters to her experiences in Saratoga, but she “forgets” to discuss an evidently critical incident before concluding the chapter titled “Saratoga.” The following chapter begins with her abrupt recognition: “I had forgotten to mention that the season I have just been describing, my baggage had been all burned up on my way to Saratoga. I will now give you a description of the circumstance” (55). Such rhetorical moves are far from conventional linearity of the literary genre. Potter follows this timeless pattern throughout the narrative and, not surprisingly, ends the book with a brief commentary on a Cincinnati opera house with no clear connection to the rest of the narrative and no closure: “Those who attend the opera,” Potter argues, “should be perfectly satisfied with having such an elegant house as an ornament to our city [Cincinnati] and should give all praise to [Samuel N. Pike] through whose energy it was erected” (178). These final words conclude the book, abandoning the reader spatially and literarily lost at an opera house in Cincinnati.29

Correspondingly, the narrative significantly lacks a traditional plot or character development. *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* does not answer questions about

28 Life narrative, as a genre, conventionally demonstrates chronological linearity that begins with an autobiographer’s earliest accessible memories to the most recent. Even when these memories are not recalled in order, published forms of life narratives often present linearity of life events. In early examples of the form produced by male autobiographers, the focus can be observed as progressive linearity. Yet, as scholars such as Estelle C. Jelinek argue, “unlike most men’s progressive, unidirectional forms, most women’s life studies tend to be disjunctive or discontinuous narratives – often interrupting the chronological order with flashbacks, anecdotes and character sketches” (1363).

29 Potter is referring to Cincinnati’s Pike Opera House built by Samuel N. Pike. As Larry Robert Wolz explains, “[a] dramatic increase in population and the coming of the railroad system, would…encourage a flurry of operatic activity in the Queen City of the 1850s, leading ultimately to the erection of Pike’s Opera House in 1859” (59).
who Potter is. Instead, the text engages in questions of where. From the beginning of her narrative, Potter asks the reader to “follow [her] footsteps over land, ocean and prairie”: she guides the reader geographically in and out of places she moves through (5). Her unique writing style heavily relies on spatial details and social relations in the geographical locations she explores. The narrative traces her steps across different states (free and slave) and countries. She pursues financial opportunities, which consequently provide her physical mobility across towns, states, and countries that include Canada, England, and France. In each chapter, Potter focuses on incidents in different geographical destinations she visits. She moves from one place to another and takes the reader with her throughout the spatially organized narrative while her social (and emotional) attachments remain in Cincinnati, “the Queen City.”

**Beyond Blackness: Re-visionsing Potter**

Although re-discovered in recent years, Potter’s work has not received much (or deserving) scholarly attention. As Xiomara Santamarina points out, despite the reprint edition in 1991, the book “remains largely unread” (105).\(^30\) While there have been studies on Potter since the re-publication of the book with Santamarina’s new introduction and biographical annotations, Potter and her work remain largely understudied, and, more importantly, misunderstood.

More recently, an excerpt from Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* appeared in a nineteenth-century African American women writers’ anthology, *The

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\(^{30}\) Since then, Santamarina has contributed significantly to research on Potter. In 2009, she published a new edition of *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* with an introduction that provides comprehensive contextual biographical information about Potter and emphasizes the significance of the re-discovery of the text in American literary traditions.
Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers (2017), a highly valuable contribution to the field, edited by Hollis Robbins and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In this collection, A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life is introduced as a “sharp-tongued and gossipy memoir” in which “Potter assumes the role of observer” (Robbins 53). Robbins and Gates, Jr. categorize A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life as “gossipy,” which strongly mimics the language of some degrading reviews of the book published in 1859.31 The excerpt selected for the anthology, “New Orleans,” takes the reader into Potter’s journeys in the South: “Potter travelled to the South, saw a slave auction, and was disturbed by what she saw, but these moments, while emphasized in most of the studies on Potter, do not loom large in her narrative” (Robbins 53). Evidently, Robbins and Gates, Jr., like many other scholars in the field, express disappointment in Potter largely due to lack of an anti-slavery focus in her work. The slave auction scene is what critics are looking for but not finding enough of in A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life. Potter’s elusive reflections on slavery and collective blackness challenge dominant African-American literary criticism.

Conversely, Potter openly refuses self-identification as an abolitionist. Even when she is arrested (and exiled) for her aforementioned involvement in a slave’s escape to Canada, she firmly believes in the innocence of her deed (7).32 She openly admits to sharing information about ways to reach across the border, but she strictly disowns any political association or label associated with her personal actions. She writes without reservation: “I don’t like abolitionists, nor any that bear that name” (150). Since the narrative does not

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31 See Cincinnati Daily Commercial, October 22, 1859.
32 I discuss this incident further in the following pages (in “Back in Our Queen City: Under My Own Vine and Fig Tree”).
follow preceding patterns of anti-slavery or abolitionist rhetoric of resistance, at the surface level, the text might be read solely as a public expose of the ladies of high social circles or as a “gossipy memoir” (Robbins 53).

Contemporary explorations of Potter mistakenly interpret her through existing frames of dominant criticism. Robbins and Gates, Jr., for instance, simply conclude that Potter functions as an observer in the narrative rather than an actor. Potter’s limited (conventional) appearance in the text is mistakenly interpreted as absence (as passive) and silence (in opposition to resistance) of the autobiographer. Scholars have often interpreted Potter’s “silence” regarding personal details as a strategy of resistance. For instance, Rynetta Davis reads Potter’s “hidden” details in the narrative as having implications for her privacy. Davis argues that “for Potter, privacy functions as an act of resistance; in the narrative ostensibly hiding her identity as a rhetorical strategy” (50, emphasis mine). For Davis, Potter’s (in)visibility functions as a political act. This is an important use of the term resistance in relation to Potter’s privacy – especially when privacy is rightfully considered “a class-based privilege” (Davis 50). The use of the term in this context is helpful, but it could potentially be limiting. While I agree that Potter’s rhetorical intentions are not accidental, reading her narrative as “resistance” intentionally or unintentionally positions her as a victim (within the unproductive dichotomy of victim v. agent). Potter’s autobiographical self should be studied beyond such bifurcating lines of

33 Similar patterns of reading can be observed in The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers. In this work, Gates, Jr. hones in on the intersection of African American literary expressions in emergence and Thomas Jefferson: “In their efforts to prove Jefferson wrong, in their words, black writers created a body of literature, one with a prime political motive to demonstrate black equality” (Gates 66). This political frame of analysis has been a dominant one in explorations of African American literature. Yet, works such as Potter’s show that prominent lenses of blackness continue to imply inherent inferiority of blackness in literature and misinterpret nineteenth century black women’s literary expressions in their richness and diversity.
thought. The fundamental conflict lies in how blackness is read in American literature: “as an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness,” Quashie aptly defines (4). However, Potter’s writing demands a revised literary approach. Respecting historical meanings of resistance, I suggest analyzing Potter’s belonging so as to challenge presupposed assumptions about nineteenth-century black women’s autobiographical identity.

The rhetoric of victimization and resistance has been a prominent approach in African-American studies, especially in relation to physical and social concepts of freedom in the nineteenth century. To be sure, I am not making a case against the important role resistance has played in the history of disadvantaged populations. In fact, the act of resistance has an undeniable historical and political centrality to movements of victimized and marginalized groups, and especially African-American populations during the nineteenth century. However, the term does not capture the multitudinous experiences of racialized bodies: “resistance is too broad a term – it is too clunky and vague and imprecise to be catch-all for a whole range of behaviors and ambitions...black women’s everyday lives [were] not shaped entirely by their engagement with and resistance to the institution of slavery” (Quashie 5). Here, Quashie is referring to everyday activities of enslaved women that were not practiced as resistance or even a response to their social or political circumstances. African American women, even those under restrictions of chattel slavery, practiced fundamental human acts of living, such as gardening and cooking.

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34 As Kevin Quashie aptly reminds us, “resistance is hard to argue against, since it has been so essential to every black freedom movement” (4).
1859, the year Potter published her unconventional narrative, was a time of widespread resistance – literally and figuratively – against chattel slavery. Yet, reading all African-American literature of the time through the same ideological lens that fixes a definition of blackness is limited and insufficient to fully understand lived-experiences of women like Potter and their published narratives. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Potter is a free-born black woman who does not display much interest in creating forms of explicit resistance through her writing. She does not define herself as a victim of slavery or even racial injustice in her writing. Therefore, studying *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* requires challenging dominant categories and our readings of the experiences and literary expressions of black women.35

Anchoring my explorations of Potter in materiality of the body, I understand her as neither victim nor agent: she is a free black woman who negotiates her physical circumstances (inextricably linked to more abstract social concepts) in mid-nineteenth century America.36 In her literary representations of social spaces (that correspond with geographical locations represented on the map), Potter recreates her environments and their occupants. And, this act of (re)writing is inextricable from her body’s placement (and its physical position and social status) within hierarchical socio-spaces.

Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of space, time, and body provides a theoretical model useful to my analysis of Potter’s materiality through her narrative. According to Grosz, the corporeality of a body must be conceived and conceptualized with their spatial materiality

35 “An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way” (Quashie 6).
36 As Alison Piepmeier states in her book-length study that focuses on the female body in the nineteenth century, “categories of public and private, victim and agent and other bifurcated ideals have come to dominate studies of nineteenth century womanhood” (5).
and [their] spatio-temporal element. As she explains, “the representation of space is...a correlate of one’s ability to locate oneself as the point of origin or reference of space: the space represented is a complement of the kind of subject who occupies it” (Grosz 90). Grosz acknowledges the subject’s perspective inextricable with spatial experience and representation. The subject, conversely, is in a simultaneous becoming with its environment – she cannot be discussed in terms of exchange or in victim/agent dichotomy. Studied in this frame of thought, Potter’s writing demonstrates spatiotemporal reflections that underline dynamic interplay between the body and its surroundings. Potter does not simply hide herself and mimic what is around her: in order to represent her environment, she simultaneously positions her body in relation to her material circumstances.

Investigating Potter’s body in its materiality requires understanding the concrete realities the body experiences and how more abstract social concepts intersect. Sara Ahmed’s sophisticated discussion of orientation highlights the body in an inextricable assembly with its environment. According to Ahmed, “orientations are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places...The body provides us with a perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds” (Queer Phenomenology 8-9). A sensual body’s position is interrelated with its perception and abilities.

The body’s position is not fixed and static – it moves, and it feels continuously. I find McCormack’s exploration of the body in movement to be helpful in furthering the discussion. McCormack defines “bodies as lively compositions crossing thresholds of intensive and extensive consistency whose limits are defined less by physical boundaries than by capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies” (2). Within this theoretical
frame, I understand Potter’s body not only as oriented in space, but also as affected by other bodies occupying same spaces with her body.

Race and class become important here. Racialized and disadvantaged populations experience disorientation more often than the majority. “Disorientation is unevenly distributed,” as Ahmed underlines: “some bodies are directed in specific ways, but the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others. It is thus possible to talk about the white world, the straight world, as a world that takes the shape of the mobility of certain skins” (159-160). Although Potter does not disclose her racial identity, her literary content, expression, and reception cannot be discussed in isolation from historical realities and anxieties of the era. Besides the fact that the majority of contemporaneous reviews of *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* reveal overwhelming negative reactions, the articles from *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* and the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* “prove that Potter was known as ‘colored’ and did not pass for white” (Santamarina 106). Therefore, Potter’s intention to “remove” her body from the majority of the narrative is not a racial passing strategy. Although Rafia Zafar argues that Potter’s self is veiled and that “this literary veil protects the black female narrator from any scrutiny save one suitable for a black woman conscious of her tenuous status within middle-class American society,” historical evidence shows undisputed visibility of Potter’s racial identity (153). What helps Potter negotiate geographic mobility and relative freedom is not her “veiled” race. It is primarily and evidently her labor.

Potter maintains an outsider-inside position in her text. That is, paradoxically, what gives Potter access (however conditional and precarious) to places, exclusively-white ballrooms she would not be invited as a guest, is her racialized labor. Through her work,
however, she not only occupies the same space as her client ladies, but also participates in and indirectly shapes events in exclusive rooms of Saratoga.

*A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* does not promise the reader a tour of the secrets about the hairdresser’s “humble sphere of life” (1). Instead, it explores what membership in American upper-class means in mid-nineteenth-century United States. As Potter remains a non-member to this class – although with access to insider knowledge – she goes in and out of high society circles. Her corporeal body, listens, observes, manipulates, and records experiences. While she does not dwell much on details about her profession, her skillful hands pragmatically negotiate sites of power. Potter does not socially participate as a class member when she practices her work. Yet, her body’s proximity to her clients (and their bodies) in personal spaces positions her inside higher-class circles. Her hands, using styling paraphernalia, physically manipulate hair – arguably one of the most intimate parts of the human body that is strongly related to public identity and performance. A Hairdresser’s job inevitably puts the laborer in skin-to-skin contact with clients. Consequently, her labor and skills directly determine her ladies’ public performance and social reception.

**Back in Our Queen City: Under My Own Vine and Fig Tree**

*So, yes, orientations matter. Those who are “out of place” have to secure a place that is not already given.*

Sara Ahmed

37 For my conceptualization of the body I borrow from Brian Massumi. He explains how he understands a human body: “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. *It moves. It feels.* In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels and it feels itself moving...To think of the body in movement, thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body” (Massumi 1.5). Following Massumi’s line of thought, I read the body in terms of sensation and movement.
Eliza Potter was a well-known hairdresser who resided in Cincinnati where she earned a professional reputation and economic security. Biographical evidence confirms that Potter lived in this city long enough for local communities to recognize her as a talented and in-demand hairdresser and the author of her life-narrative.\footnote{Santamarina underlines that Potter “lived [in Cincinnati] on and off for twenty years, so she assumes that most of her readers would know her” (200).} Originally published anonymously, \textit{A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life} evidently appealed to its local (Cincinnati) audience with literary details that surely exposed the Cincinnati hairdresser as the author of this largely scandalous publication. Limited autobiographical elements and extensive discussions of intimate (or “secret”) information about familiar faces and places – easily identifiable by her readers – strongly suggest that Potter’s presumed audience is primarily her Cincinnati friends and acquaintances. Correspondingly, Potter’s experiences in the book are anchored in Cincinnati, the Queen City. This is not to say that she solely narrates experiences in Cincinnati. While those Cincinnati scenes are in abundance in the book, she details her journeys beyond the boundaries of the city for Cincinnatians who may not be familiar with the places she visits or for people who might know these places but not the life behind the scenes.

Throughout the spatially organized narrative, Potter’s body is in motion.\footnote{I discuss Potter’s traveling body and meanings of the corporeal body in motion through spaces it occupies and moves through in the next section, “Potter’s Be/longing and Movement,” in more detail.} But, even when she travels through different places, she remains strongly connected to her city: often, she compares people and places of various destinations to Cincinnati and its populations. Her experiences and observations in the South provide opportunities for racial commentary – which are rare in the text. She refers to some scenes she witnesses in the South (New Orleans) as unsettling: in the beginning of the chapter titled “Natchez – New
Orleans,” she writes: “I have been witness to many queer scenes in this southern country” (84). Her discomfort is clear through her tone, especially in sections she devotes to her southern reflections. What Potter witnesses in southern states does not parallel her economic and social freedom earned and established in Cincinnati. On the subject, Lisa Ze Winters notes that the “Natchez – New Orleans” chapter “appears to reinforce nineteenth century representations of New Orleans as the ultimate Other, marking the limits of a U.S. racial order governed by sex and slavery” (457). Despite implied dangers targeting black people in this geography, Potter travels freely with her clients across the state. Yet, she also adamantly underlines that she does not belong in the south – certainly not in the slave auction markets in New Orleans she witnesses in terror.

During a business trip to New Orleans, Potter witnesses a slave auction of a young girl “who, it appeared, had been born in New York [just like Potter], and had gone traveling with an unprincipled family” (102). As Winters studies, “the similarities between [Potter] and the young girl on the auction block lay bare the terror of a racialized and sexualized slave geography that stretches from New Orleans to New York” (471). Potter watches the auction from a safe distance and does not disclose the skin tone of the girl, who gains her freedom by presenting her free papers hidden in her corset. Meanwhile, Potter remains an “invisible” spectator away from the crowd “[in the rotunda] watching this market” (102). This incident affects Potter deeply: “I then left feeling more heavily burdened than ever in my life – vowing and declaring that I would never come another season to the South – to earn money that was made so hard by others” (102). Although she does not directly relate to the girl on the auction block, Potter makes it clear that she understands the risks of being in the South. She finds slavery’s impact on people’s lives sickening (although she does not
identify as an abolitionist). Potter’s response to what she sees on the auction block is evidently rooted in her privileged position that separates these two women. She does not record this observation as part of a collective racial resistance, but to emphasize where she, individually, positions herself. After this experience, not only does she determine to stay away from New Orleans, but she also – through her observations – implies that identifying with other black people can be dangerous with immediate consequences.

As a free-born working-class American woman who claims the privilege to choose her own path – social and geographical, – Potter concludes that New Orleans is not an ideal place for her. She looks forward to ending her professional commitments in this area so she can go back to her Queen City, where she desires to live and belong. Her rootedness in Cincinnati strengthens her mobility and provides locational stability for Potter. Her established life with social and financial investments extends her boundaries. She travels with confidence, knowing that her roots in the Queen City secure her socio-economic status. Correspondingly, she makes sure to end the Natchez chapter by saying, “I will now leave Natchez and confine myself to my own State” (115, emphasis added). Potter embraces the privilege to choose where she resides (and belongs) permanently.

Although she never openly identifies as a black woman, Potter explores the consequences of being mixed-race in places she visits – both in southern and northern states. For instance, she mentions a family in Louisiana with three sons and a mulatto servant, who is their undisclosed half-brother: “a mulatto servant...who was, in stature, color, and disposition, pretty much the same as the brothers, only a shade or so darker...many knew who he was, but on account of [the father’s] millions and his father,
nothing was said” (90-91). As with many other sketches in the narrative, this one about the Louisiana family appears to bear no apparent relevance to other people or stories in the chapter “Natchez” or the rest of the book. Following her unique stylistic pattern, Potter inserts this story as part of the geographical mosaic of her literary impressions. The family portrait Potter chooses to discuss in this section of the book exemplifies disadvantages mixed-race people of the South experience. Potter’s geographical belonging in Cincinnati as well as corresponding socio-economical privileges distance her from people such as the “mulatto servant” mentioned (90).

It is important to note that in recording this story, Potter omits names of the characters. Her sketches of incidents in different geographical locations aim to create a larger impression of places. And her socioeconomic privileges allow her to examine other people’s lives in slave locations she freely navigates from the outside. Unlike many people of her race who are involuntarily bound to people and places in the antebellum United States, Potter’s mixed race does not limit her agency or mobility.

As Potter explores social relationships in her various destinations, she rests her analytical observations in Cincinnati. That is, she compares her experiences in places she visits to Cincinnatian norms. For instance, commenting on her observations of interracial marriages of mixed-race people in a town she visits, Potter writes:

On one occasion, while in Saratoga, they were coming to the dinner-table, and some ladies, who came along, said they were not white, they looked like negroes [sic]...All this is nothing; for in our Queen City of the West, I know hundreds of

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40 Santamarina clarifies this story for the contemporary reader: “Though Potter is somewhat evasive, her readers would have picked up on the implications of the mulatto being the white men’s half brother, the offspring of an extramarital sexual liaison between the slave owner and a slave woman” (208n6).
mulattoes who are married to white men, and lawfully married. Some of these pass as white, and some, again, are so independent they will be thought nothing but what they are. (91, emphasis added)

While underlining geographical differences in social possibilities for mixed-race members of the society, Potter offers different real-life examples. Challenging the dominant tragic mulatto character of the nineteenth century, her approach shows diversity within that population.41 And significantly, she emphasizes possibilities for independent mulattoes, such as Potter herself, who do not need to pass as white to belong in Cincinnati, unlike other places respectively. Her commentary on nineteenth-century race-relations in Cincinnati implies race as determined not by biological heritage but by social mobility and financial status.

In the quote above, Potter’s ownership of the city as “our Queen City” is not accidental. Her rhetoric indicates permanent residence and a self-claimed, strong attachment to this place. Her repeated emphasis as a collective sense of ownership with her usage of “our” also suggests her claim of belonging with her audience. Knowing her biographical information outside the narrative would help understand Potter’s belonging with the “independent” mulattoes of the city. She does not associate herself with any of the groups she mentions but assumes a role as a social critic who has the inside knowledge of different populations in different parts of the country. Her long years of being on the road

41 The term *mulatto* was first introduced by Lydia Maria Child’s short story “The Quadroons,” published in 1842. In an endnote to the UNC-Press edition of the book, Santamarina explains Potter’s uncommon discussions of mulattoes in the narrative: “in much of the abolitionist literature of the day, mulattoes were represented as tragic figures, disowned by white fathers who had spawned them illegitimately and perhaps even sold them into slavery” (208n7).
and her physical proximity to her elite clients equip her with reliable authority and authenticity in the narrative.

As the narrative demonstrates and biographical evidence indicates, during her years in Cincinnati, Potter socially and physically separated herself from the city’s African-American population. As Taylor underlines, “her work spilled over into her social life so much that the two were nearly inextricably joined. Potter spent so much time working and socializing in that milieu [the world of elite white women] that she was relatively socially isolated from Cincinnati’s black community” (136). Potter builds her life among the white elites of the city. Physically positioning Potter on the map of mid-nineteenth-century Cincinnati, Taylor shows that Potter is a member of “the white St. Paul’s Episcopal Church” and a resident of a white block “outside the black residential core of the First, Fourth, and Ninth wards” (136). Potter, a property-owning resident, builds her life within the white circles of Cincinnati. Her belonging with the Queen City and with her white neighbors is emphasized by statements such as “our Queen City” that establish a clear common ground with the white elite. Through her writing, Potter argues that she is not a visitor to the Queen City but a permanent, participating member of the local white community. This community, however, does not readily welcome Potter.

Claiming (and proving) her membership in Cincinnati and its social circles is evidently a challenging journey for Potter. During her early years in the area (Kentucky

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42 Taylor follows up this observation with an emphasis on Potter’s connections with black communities: “Despite Potter’s immersion in white society, her commitments and responsibilities rested within her own race. She served as a trustee for the Colored Orphan Asylum and was arrested for assisting fugitive slaves to freedom” (136). While Potter does have some historical connections with the black community, those connections are almost entirely left out of A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life. Therefore, I disagree with Taylor on Potter’s racial commitments. Potter’s “commitments and responsibilities” do not seem to rest with her own race – as her publication proves.
and Ohio), she records having been arrested and exiled from the city. Accompanying a
family that employs her as a “child’s nurse,” Potter travels to Louisville. She meets a black
man at the Louisville Hotel, where they stay. In her narrative, Potter outlines the order of
incidents that lead to her arrest and imprisonment:

[T]he brother of the missing slave…was employed as a servant. This brother the
lady had publicly threatened to sell unless the girl should produce herself. I saw
him – pitied him, and had some conversation with him, during which he told me a
sad story of suffering, and asked me, in imploring accents, if I knew of a spot on
this wide earth, where he could be free. (6, emphasis in the original)

Potter shares what she knows about Canada and a way to get there. This way (presumably
through underground railroad) takes this man from Kentucky to Canada. Potter, without
details, expresses her relief upon hearing the news of him crossing the border: “on my
knees I thanked God that I had been the humble means of unloosing the shackles of one
upright and manly soul” (7). The owners of the slave fail to locate him and bring him back.
Potter, as a result, is blamed and “arrested as accessory to the deed” as she arrives in
Cincinnati.43 Her arrest and her trial “before the bar of [her] country,” as she records,
receives widespread attention in Cincinnati and other bordering cities (7). Although during
the trial Potter does not deny sharing unlawful information on the aforementioned escape
route with the fugitive slave, she refuses to identify herself as an abolitionist.44 She decides

43 At this point, it is important to underline antebellum Cincinnati’s relationship to slavery and slave states. According to Taylor, although the state was free, “Cincinnati’s economy was dependent on the peculiar institution. The city’s merchants and manufacturers supplied southern slaveholders with food and goods for their enslaved workforce. This trading relationship was so critical to the city’s economy that the business and merchant classes that governed Cincinnati went to great lengths to ensure that southern economic interests were protected in the city by routinely returning fugitive slaves to their owners and by arresting those who harbored them. Additionally, they tolerated and sometimes encouraged abolitionist mobs” (4).
44 Later in the book, Potter openly declares her political views regarding anti-slavery activism: “I don't like abolitionists, nor any that bear the name, as I have seen so much injustice and wrong, and actually speculation
to help the man primarily because of the emotional impact of his story. During her trial, she refuses to accept any wrongdoing because she argues that her actions rest in what she “conscientiously felt to be a Christian deed” (7). She takes ownership of her actions with good intentions, despite undesirable consequences. Not denying her aid in the slave’s escape – at the time or later in retrospect – she remains confident in her innocence: she “recognized no crime in what [she] had done” (8). Her open willingness to help a slave escape to Canada and her confessional statements undeniably risk her local reputation among her future neighbors and white elite clients. Since this incident occurs before she builds a professional reputation as a talented hairdresser, many of her fellow Americans’ first impression of her is evidently not a very profitable one for Potter.

Many of her future clients, friends and other Cincinnatian acquaintances witness Potter’s arrest. At a time when economic wealth of the city depended heavily on slavery, abolitionists faced public scrutiny and violent circumstances. As Nikki M. Taylor’s historical exploration demonstrates, “business and merchant classes that governed Cincinnati...tolerated and sometimes encouraged abolitionist mobs” (4). Amidst the intensity of this socio-political climate in the antebellum Queen City, Potter is taken under arrest. The trial that follows her initial custody demands her transfer to Kentucky, a slave state, from Ohio – to the other side of the river (Figure 3). Crossing this river involuntarily signifies distance from the elite neighborhoods and her potential future clients (and friends). The river, as the 1862 map of the city shows, marks a tangible line between Cincinnati and the world beyond.

done in that name, that I hate to hear it; but I like every person – slave-holders, free-holders, or any other kind of holders who treat people right, regardless of nation, station of color; and all men and women who love their Redeemer, will do this without confining themselves to any one name to make themselves conspicuous” (150).
Potter’s exile is a public and spatial act of punishment. She becomes a physical spectacle, an ignominious object to display and deport. As her arrested and vulnerable body is submissively transported outside the border of her city, “thousands of persons followed [her] to the ferry-boat, which was to convey [her] across the Ohio River – some in sorrow and some in joy; all believing that [she] had made [her] final exit from Cincinnati – which, however...was a mistake” (7). Potter’s walk of banishment gathers a large crowd of people by the river, a tangible and symbolic line between bondage and freedom. Not all members of the audience at the riverside are against Potter, as she underlines. Regardless, however, her body on display becomes the center of public scrutiny.

For Potter, this journey across the river is not a chosen or desired one – unlike others in the narrative. Her arrest, though temporary, interrupts her freedom of physical mobility. Crossing the river border between a free state and a slave state marks this interruption in
her life and narrative. This experience, which Potter records in only a couple pages following her introduction of herself as a free entrepreneur who is “at liberty to choose [her] own course...determined to travel and to gratify [her] long cherished desire to see the world,” puts her self-proclaimed freedom under a different light (3). Her physical (and social) mobility rests firmly in her social relations with local circles, which are inextricably connected to her professional ones. Sustaining her liberty to travel, therefore, requires putting down roots in the city with its initially suspicious residents.

Potter’s journey from Cincinnati shore to the Newport jail exemplifies a forced movement of her imprisoned body. This vulnerable body on display is followed by a large audience as she is physically and socially forced outside the geographical and political borders of the Queen City. As the boat sails her body across the water, the crowd does not take physical action against Potter. This faceless audience does not include bodies familiar to Potter personally; she is surrounded by strangers. And, more importantly, she, presumably, has no family members to support her or witness the trial. The mob is skeptical about her deeds and possible value to their community. Her body is a disposable one for this crowd primarily because she has no connections to the land or its people at this point. Recording her body under physical arrest, Potter addresses the same city and its people: “I am now, endeavoring to recall to myself, and those who may honor me with a perusal, some few of the strange incidents of my life” (7). Potter’s reading of this particular incident as “strange” subtly (but effectively) accuses those who wrongfully condemn her at the time. Her coming back to this city as a permanent resident among the local white elites proves the crowd – and now the readers – wrong and shows her persistence in sustaining her freedom and mobility. Her temporary exile and public shame do not discourage Potter from
her determination to return Cincinnati and prove her valuable membership in the same local community that mistakenly believes Potter would never make it back to their side of the river again.

Potter’s physical (and social) abilities are “arrested” twice in the narrative: due to undesired matrimony and her time in jail following the trial (in this order). Her westward journey from New York is interrupted and delayed by her marriage in Buffalo: “my journey,” Potter confessionally records, “was suddenly arrested by a sort of ceremony called *matrimony*, which I entered into very naturally, and became quieted down under it for a length of time, *just as naturally*” (3, emphasis in the original). Her matrimonial (involuntary) commitment is not only an inconvenience but also a physical restraint. Her physical act of speaking is limited or perhaps lost completely during her marriage. Under marital “arrest” she is unable to verbally express herself through acts of speaking or writing. This social imprisonment holds her captive, preventing independent travel for longer than she can (or would want to) tolerate. While Potter claims “being at liberty to choose [her] own course,” she does not take complete responsibility for the matrimonial decision and action. She equates marriage – at least for a woman in her position – to undesired silence. Her almost mocking tone describing her wedding ceremony shows her unconventional disapproval of matrimonial obligations.

Matrimony is a handicap for Potter, and it is a rare instance where she positions herself as a victim. More importantly, however, she chooses not to dwell on self-victimization. Instead, she highlights her self-aware character that demands agency. The way she reflects on her position in matrimony is a violent one: her expressions, such as becoming “quieted down…under it for a length of time,” indicate emotional pain and
endurance (3). As her marriage limits her freedom and mobility, her undesired submission functions as captivity that she forcefully endures. As a married woman, she loses her voice figuratively. Yet, she acknowledges her circumstances as common and “natural.” Only when she thinks of other women who are victims of such systematic oppression and submission called matrimony, Potter’s feelings of guilt and shame are alleviated: “I have seen other persons do the same thing, and so, I suppose, I need not be ashamed to own having committed a weakness” (3). She views her marital “arrest” as a common one inherent to the institution. For Potter, matrimony is an external force “which has, from the beginning of time, numbered the most respectable of the earth among its victims” (3). She is one of those victims refusing to be kept quiet and permanently anchored in domestic boundaries. She eventually finds her way out of this social imprisonment and escapes confinement as “the desire for roving again took possession of [her]” (3). Although she does not, at any point in the narrative, identify as a victim in the face of slavery and the racial injustices she at times witnesses black people endure, matrimony presents itself as an external force that inevitably but temporarily victimizes Potter.45

Comparatively, when she is taken into custody in Cincinnati, her body is incapacitated. She is exposed and vulnerable as a black female body under arrest. Her marriage and jail-time are undoubtedly two different incidents under different circumstances. Yet, there are strategic similarities between the two. In both cases, Potter

45 Even though matrimony can in certain circumstances be considered similar to enslavement, here, Potter’s writing suggests otherwise. I read her brief reflection on her marriage as a way of retrospective self-criticism (perhaps with some guilt and regret). Knowing her strong will and desire to travel and her independent character, she is almost trying to understand how and why she would remain restricted as a wife for as long as she did.
“breaks free” from the boundaries against the odds and public opinion in order to find new opportunities for work and travel.

Potter follows her desire to travel despite some “strange incidents” that interrupt her journeys. She saves herself from restrictions of racial oppression and social restrictions of various obligations (such as marital life) and writes her “self-exiled” (in her own words) character anchored to Cincinnati, the city she is once forced to leave. Although Potter travels across the country and beyond, after her initial introduction to the area (as a domestic worker for a family whose name she does not disclose), she keeps coming back to the Queen City and eventually settles here. Correspondingly, she makes her strong economic, social and sentimental attachments to the city clear.

Just as the narrative begins with her arrival at the Queen City, it ends with a chapter titled “Cincinnati,” one of the longest chapters of the book. And in that unconventional conclusion, Potter proudly declares her belonging to the city by calling it, once again, “our
Queen City” (145, emphasis added). A keen observer who has self-proclaimed authority as a social critic, Potter comments on the significance of local architecture as a social space of interaction. For instance, her final words in the last chapter study the opera house in town: “those who attend the opera,” argues Potter, “should be perfectly satisfied with having such an elegant house as an ornament to *our city* and should give all praise to him through whose energy it was erected” (178, emphasis added). Potter celebrates the city’s history through the opera house building (Figure 4). She not only recognizes the value of the structure but also acknowledges the physical labor of bodies, in flesh and blood, that built this communal hub. Through this building, Potter establishes kin with forefathers of the city. She claims ownership of the history as well as the present of her Queen City. She is proud to call herself a Cincinnatian among her white elite clients, friends and neighbors, *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* demonstrates not only Potter’s freedom to settle in a place that once physically expelled her, but also the strong kinship between the city and the hairdresser. Cincinnati belongs to Potter as Potter belongs in Cincinnati.

When Potter published *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* in Cincinnati in 1859, she had been living in the city for over at least a decade. Her readers were skeptical about her motives to publish the book. In the same degree, many reviewers harshly critique the literary quality of the work and its author. Nevertheless, even the most skeptical audience trusted the truthfulness of Potter and the accuracy of the details about people and events documented in the book. From the beginning of the work, Potter promises nothing but the truth, although several names of key characters discussed are obscured throughout the narrative. As this rhetorical strategy demonstrates, she does not present a literary exposé of the Cincinnatian elite’s gossip-worthy or scandalous secrets. Self-aware of her social
rank and in anticipation of critical public reaction, Potter opens her book with a disclaimer. She introduces herself not as a literary authority but as a social critic qualified by long years of experience and exceptional recognition among social circles of white elites:

[N]owhere do the hearts betray themselves more unguardedly than in the private boudoir, where the hair-dresser’s mission makes her a daily attendant. Why, then, should not the hair-dresser write, as well as the physician and clergyman? She will tell her story in simpler language; but it will be none the less truthful, none the less strange. (1)

Just as a physician or clergyman, the hairdresser is a professional expert in her field, rightfully argues Potter. Her confidence as the author of her book does not rest in her adequate prose but in her knowledge of her clients and their exclusive stories.

Potter gains access to some of the most private information about her clients’ lives when she performs her duties as a hairdresser. She combs her ladies’ hair in their private rooms. While on duty, she usually remains quiet in the background. But, her corporeal presence and physical performance determine and manipulate fashion, a significant class-signifier for the elite white clients. Potter’s vocation grants her access to non-public scenes in public figures’ lives and lodgings. Her regular appearance in places behind-the-scenes help her build exceptional relationships with women who depend significantly on Potter’s skills for their public presentability in high social circles. Potter’s largely silent working body gives her access to private knowledge she would not have otherwise.

46 Similarly, Elizabeth Keckley’s labor as a seamstress, as I discuss further in Chapter Two, invites Keckley into the White House. As Keckley’s hands and eyes move through expensive fabric for Mary Todd Lincoln’s gowns, Keckley occupies private rooms in this public house where she learns insider information while remaining an outsider.
By publishing stories of her ladies’ private rooms where the women are most transparent and vulnerable, she breaks the silence of the hairdresser body. As her narrative peels off the upper-class glamour for her readers’ “amusement,” she simultaneously takes ownership of her voice, loud and clear (1). Encouraged by “many ladies and gentlemen” to write and publish her eventful years among high-class ladies and gentlemen, Potter decides to embark on a literary journey with *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life*. She concludes that she “might just as well note down a few of [her] experiences for their amusement as not” (1). Many of her readers were not “amused,” however.

Although the book received mixed reviews following its publication, local “gossip” about the respected higher-class members of society provoked harsh criticisms against Potter and her work. An October 1859 review in *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, for instance, describes Potter as "a person fashionably known as a ‘lady ob color,’ [sic]...The book is distinguished by nothing so much as that total lack of taste and delicacy which we should expect to find in a work professing to narrate a ‘hair-dresser’s experience in high life.’ The *innate* vulgarity, the prying curiosity, the offensive coarseness of the class to which the author belongs, are fitly and fully illustrated in its pages” (“A Reviewer Reviewed,” emphasis added). Evidently, Potter’s racial classification has a great impact on her publication’s reputation. Although Potter does not disclose her race or describe herself openly as a black woman, such public critiques of the book build on racialized foundations of social hierarchies. In this review, her lack of taste and delicacy are directly attributed to race and class positions. The book is considered predictably low quality, demonstrating stereotyped working-class black-women traits in antebellum Midwest.
Through Potter, this review denigrates an entire class labeled inherently inferior and unqualified for public recognition. While, according to this review, the literary product does not satisfy critical expectations, Potter’s act of writing and publishing a self-life narrative is evidently exceptional. Introducing the author first as a black woman – not as an accomplished and popular hair stylist who authors her own narrative – shows that her authorship is uncommon and unwelcomed. The reviewer clearly does not expect or approve of a black hairdresser being able to write and publish a book under her own name. But Potter embraces her position as a hairdresser, albeit a “humble” one (1). In “The Author’s Appeal,” Potter explains:

"It may perhaps be considered presumptive for one in my humble sphere of life to think of writing a book; but influenced by the earnest persuasions of many ladies and gentlemen, I have at last concluded that I might just as well note down a few of my experiences for their amusement as not." (1)

Writing and publishing a book is not an overt or intentional literary statement for Potter. Accepting her writerly limitations, she does not claim literary authority. Her writing appears to be inextricable with her social circles and relationships. She declares the main purpose of her book as entertainment.\(^47\) Her belonging does not rely on her resisting racialized degradation and discrimination but on her paradoxical position as an insider/outside and resident/traveler. Potter challenges dominant categories of race and class by equating the value of her literary position to “the physician” or “clergyman,” as mentioned above (1). She dissociates herself and her labor from racial classifications (and

\(^{47}\) Potter’s autobiographical act does not follow conventional genre elements of self-inquiry or self-investigation. She is interested in producing content for her readers’ amusement over self-exploration. See Smith and Watsons _Reading Autobiography_ for a detailed discussion of genre elements and the autobiographical act.
prejudices). Through her “humble” but assertive tone, she takes ownership of her career as a hairdresser (1). Her undisclosed racial identity with the emphasis on her working-class status strengthen her authority as the autobiographer. Correspondingly, her rhetorical strategies challenge presumable assumptions about black working-class women in this era.

Entrepreneurial opportunities Potter creates and exploits for her socio-economic advancement are unprecedented at a time when being free and black in this antebellum American landscape does not suggest equality and inclusion for all. Taylor emphasizes, in a similar vein:

[N]ineteenth-century Cincinnati was a crossroad of opportunity for whites, but for African Americans it was the crossroad of the worst aspects of northern, southern, and western culture. [African Americans] endured economic repression, racial segregation and exclusion, and the denial of civil rights compounded by extreme and frequent mob violence. (5)

With her talents, services, and strategies of belonging, Potter distinguishes herself from other African Americans in Cincinnati, where she belongs. In the midst of social and political tensions of the antebellum era, her interrelationship with her Queen City is evidently fragile. As a free black woman who exploits her socioeconomic circumstances, Potter’s rhetoric asserts her membership to her communities in Cincinnati. She guides the reader through her travels. Yet, she also makes clear that Cincinnati is her home.

**Potter’s Be/Longing and Movement**

*A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* “hides” Potter’s body in plain sight. Potter’s success as a narrator rests in this ability, which is also a privilege she exploits. Just as she determines to be single (physically and socially, if not legally), she chooses to guide
the reader spatially in and out of places her body moves through in proximity to white elites. In this section, I focus specifically on the importance of Potter’s mobile body that disturbs strict victimization of blackness. As a hairdresser who conditionally co-occupies rooms with higher-class ladies, Potter holds an outsider position with lucrative insider knowledge. Her largely silent body while on duty emphasizes her absent presence and precarious belonging in these exclusive spaces. This body is capable of mobility as well as strategic and intentional immobility, as I discuss in the following pages, within her historical environment and personal circumstances.

While details of self-exposure are peripheral to the sketches of high life in the book (to the extent that she excludes information about her children and family life), Potter establishes her authority as a narrator – just as she claims her authority as a social critic. As Santamarina aptly underlines, Potter’s labor and reputation among Cincinnatians “transformed the hairdresser into a social expert” (110). Potter describes this profitable personal development through her profession as related to her exposure to various characters. In her own words, Potter has “seen so much of human nature in [her] humble position,” and she has the expert ability “by looking at a man or woman [to] tell what they are” (127). In the scenes she chooses to record, the hairdresser herself is rarely the central character. Yet, she actively seeks opportunities to make her voice heard loud and clear. Her physical mobility in direct relation to her professional career provides Potter fertile grounds for her authoritative narrator with demonstrated social skills and wisdom. Her work allows Potter’s strong presence in the narrative even when she might be largely invisible or insignificant to her clients in scenes described. During her travels, Potter directs attention to tangible details about elegant places and stories of ladies that occupy those places.
Potter’s almost voyeuristic presence in the majority of the text demonstrates her interest in guiding the reader through exclusive spaces of which she claims insider knowledge. Potter admits observing public and private relationships during her years on the road (literally and figuratively). She also distances herself from those people she observes and analyzes. Her social expertise is rooted in her simultaneous distance from and proximity to higher-class circles.

Potter builds her clientele gradually as fashionable ladies discover her talent and high-quality work. She takes pride in her labor and acknowledges compliments that help her make financial and social progress. During one of her travels, she meets a lady, Mrs. A., who praises Potter’s talent as extraordinary. Reflecting on their first meeting, Potter writes: “the lady had been accustomed to have her hair dressed in the South...while on board, I dressed her hair all the way down...she said there was no one there [in the South] could dress hair any better than I could, which was very encouraging to me” (22-23). This encounter provides her the first promising financial opportunity through hairdressing and strengthens her entrepreneurial career. Mrs. A. employs Potter as her hairdresser, and this employment helps Potter find other clients in the South. This business trip encourages her to continue offering services. It also provides a financial foundation to build a career: Potter discloses that she “made that season two hundred dollars” (23). Following long periods of poverty, her earnings relieve her financially and give her confidence.

The rapid growth of her beauty market establishes a local Cincinnati audience for the book as well. Her professional success that helps her get out of poverty also justifies

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48 As Santamarina explains, Potter’s earnings of two hundred dollars “would be approximately $5,000 in 2005” (204n7).
her authorial credibility. Potter’s expertise in fashion and beauty business creates a convenient environment to improve social relationships and analytical skills. These professional opportunities allow her to be in close contact with clients in intimate settings, where she is often ignored as an outsider. Yet, Potter is familiar with people and their secrets behind closed doors. By publishing such exclusive information, she exploits her silent position. Eventually in writing, Potter gives voice to her laboring body. The hairdresser narrates through the position of her body in proximity to others in spaces they co-occupy.

Similar patterns of strategic silences can be observed outside clients’ private rooms as well. For instance, Potter’s often quiet-in-the-moment body can be observed in movement during one of many of the railroad trips she describes. On her way back from Saratoga, Potter recognizes one of her clients traveling with a lady friend. At that moment, she chooses not to make her body seen by those two higher-class (white) women who seat themselves in front of Potter. “I was sitting right behind them, and as I had a headache, I kept my veil over my face,” she reflects: “[T]hey supposing me asleep, kept up the conversation and talked over a good many ladies’ names I worked for, and also my own name was mentioned; it was with difficulty I kept still, but wishing to hear them finish their conversation, I kept as quiet as I could” (145). Potter blames her headache for the disguise but continues to hide her face in order to benefit from her circumstance. Her selective (in)visibility is strategic in such instances. Yet, this act of “hiding” is not only an act of resistance or an example of “silence” but also a strategy to access. Potter shifts public gaze and manipulates silence in exchange for private information. Her absent presence enables
her writing – her subsequent, deliberate, public act. Only by being “inactive” can she access insider knowledge.

While her clients trust Potter’s laboring body and share confidential details in her presence, when she is out in public – where her body occupies the same public space as white elite women – she chooses intentional immobility to manipulate her circumstances. Her clients “talk about each other and pick one another to pieces,” writes Potter; she adds, “then they pack all they can on the hair-dresser’s shoulders. Truly a hair-dresser has a good deal to contend with” (121). Her violent description of these women talking behind each other’s back shows her disapproval of them. And, evidently, when on duty, being a good listener and letting these women open up to her (in a presumably one-way relationship that does not invite the hairdresser to contribute) is an expected part of her job. Contrastingly, Potter is off-duty on the train as an unidentified passenger when she encounters the two ladies. Physical circumstances, the positions of the material bodies allow Potter to choose immobility and temporary silence. In both cases (when she is on duty in private rooms of her clients and when she is a solo traveler free black woman), she learns confidential details about social circles she is not a member of. But the difference in intentionality that emphasizes the free black woman’s agency productively separates the two.

Having been around elite women for long years, Potter concludes that “ladies are in the habit of saying a great many things, not only to the hairdresser, but to others, which would be a great deal better unsaid. When these things come to be talked about they forget saying them to any one but the hairdresser” (121). Potter’s professional practice brings her body to close contact with her ladies in their private settings. The intimate nature of hairdressing and the duration of her paid services allow the ladies to be vulnerable and
share their secrets with the hairdresser.⁴⁹ Although she does not have the power to stop them from having “conversations that [she] knew and that [she] had no business to hear,” she evidently resents occasions in which she is the one to blame when private information goes public (37). Potter’s rhetoric through the literary publication gains her the upper hand over her ladies – not by revealing their secrets (because she intends to protect their confidentiality by censoring people’s names), but by critiquing the quality of her clients’ manners and ladyhood.

Potter’s knowledge and critical authority over codes of ladyhood is not an indication of her social membership and participation. In fact, it is her paradoxical position as an outsider with insider knowledge that suggests capacities of belonging. Although she has the opportunity to inhabit private rooms and public streets in proximity to white elite bodies, she is denied the privileges of a lady. Potter’s body is excluded from spaces and denied equal access not only socially (more abstract), but also corporeally. Her continuing existence in such environments, however, depends on her absent presence. She dresses her ladies for ballrooms where she cannot socialize or aristocratic parties she is unable to attend. As Potter states, she “was not an invited guest,” but she “had innumerable opportunities of observing how [parties] were conducted” (121). Potter is physically denied entrance as an invited guest. Yet, her physical labor and services, which shape her clients’ public image, mark her participation in social spaces that exclude her. From a distance, she

⁴⁹ Similarly, Elizabeth Keckley becomes more than Mary Todd Lincoln’s seamstress. What allows Keckley financial security and freedom also invites her into some lucrative White House secrets. Keckley, like Potter, does not demand information about people and incidents outside her personal life circles. Yet, her body’s proximity to key people in her story allows her to put the knowledge into pragmatic use through the publication of her work, Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House.
affects ladyhood in action. Her obligatory distance from these scenes allows her to study people and places in detail.

Potter knows the American high class of her time intimately. As Santamarina underlines, “Potter and her readers appear to share an anxiety about the growing difficulty of discerning who really ‘belongs’ among the higher classes and who does not” (200). Her unique position allows Potter to develop abilities to analyze people and their public performances. She is an expert on changing meanings and practices of ladyhood – due to and despite her working-class status. She knows when a woman should keep her thoughts to herself, for instance, when her clients do not. She demonstrates the knowledge and ability to be a “lady” in comparison to many who claim that identity. Potter profits from her state of exclusion – both professionally and financially. Her outsider inside position grants her physical mobility in addition to socio-economic advantages.

Potter not only has the financial power to participate in high societies, but she also demonstrates ways of being a member. Correspondingly, she implies her elite status (already) as a hairdresser. Having “learned the art in Paris,” she distinguishes herself among others in the profession – black or white (22). She considers her labor not just as a way to earn wages but also as art that deserves praise. Her artistic talents earn her popularity over time. But, not all ladies are fashionable enough to appreciate and compensate her services. Her pride in her “elite” background in Paris fashion implies her superiority to some women who claim to be ladies in an aristocratic impression. Her strategies of belonging, once again, challenge established (and exclusive) categories.

Having traveled and seen more than some of her American clients, Potter declares her authority in hair and fashion. She regards European beauty standards, in which she
specifically claims expertise, to be more elite than American practices. During her early years in the area, for instance, she is disappointed in Cincinnatian higher classes that are not as fashionably sophisticated as European women. Potter states:

During most of that time I was East and South dressing hair, as the Cincinnati ladies were not French enough to employ a hair-dresser at that time; but in these latter days some of our ladies go to France...so, by that means, they do not lose sight of the French fashions. (116)

French style is considered superior to American fashion, as Potter implies. And her fluency in French elegance helps her claim an elite hairdresser identity and market her exceptional services to her Cincinnati clients as high value. What Potter can offer as a social critic and high-class hair artist highlight possibilities of belonging in her Queen City.

She not only dresses her clients well, but she also tastefully adorns her own body with high quality clothing and accessories. Potter proudly invests in expensive materials that challenge dominant race and class assumptions. Through her professional services for high societies – that categorize her as a working-class woman – Potter can physically shape her public presentation and manipulate impressions of her body in public. Potter’s unapologetic embrace of her elegant taste and corresponding material expression through wearable fashion increases her social volume – audible and inaudible. As Davis rightfully emphasizes, “Potter may seem to escape notice however, as her struggle with the Albany Railroad employees suggest, her well-dressed body poses a visible threat” (42). Here, Davis is referring to Potter’s visits to the railroad company main station in Albany following a train car fire to which she loses many of her high-priced dresses. During a railroad trip to Saratoga, Potter’s personal luggage with her belongings (dresses, most
importantly) burns in a train fire. Following the accident, the company redirects its passengers to their main station in Albany. Potter visits the office in order to be compensated for her material losses. The process takes longer than she anticipates. After being delayed for a couple days, she receives a disappointing two hundred dollars, “which Mr. F. thought was a great deal too much for [her] to handle, and thought one hundred enough” (57). The value of Potter’s portable and wearable belongings the railroad officers assess is grounded in their perception of Potter (in terms of race, class and gender codes) and estimation of her financial status to determine what she is likely to afford in a luggage. To their surprise, Potter is a successful working woman who not only invests in real estate but also in expensive fashion merchandise.

For her hard work, exceptional talent and economic independence, Potter demands the respect she deserves. And she represents her body, indirectly through her material belongings, as worthy of such respect and praise. She is capable of speaking up for this right in situations that question her worth and hard-won success. Not satisfied with the amount she receives, Potter goes back to the office in Albany to “get the balance of [her] money” (57). Dresses of high quality and price she can afford astonishes Mr. F. and his colleagues. Hearing Potter’s “antique dress” burnt in the suitcase cost her “thirty five dollars,” Mr. F. compares: “his wife had never had a dress cost so much” (57). Potter’s tone is far from apologetic in response:

I laughed and told him I had a dress which cost me fifty dollars, and a mantle to suit which cost me fifty more; and if his highness pleased, I had a suit cost me one hundred and fifty dollars...I was never more amused in my life than at seeing the different railroad gentlemen pick up my list and shrink from it, as if it were an
impossibility for a working [not black] woman to have such a wardrobe. One of them seemed quite horrified at the very idea of my having ten silk dresses with me; but it afforded me a good deal of pleasure to let him know I had as many more at home. (57)

The officers question Potter’s documented prosperity. Her bitter humor in response is evident in this passage. She savors the moment of their bewilderment in the face of her economic status and takes her time listing the valuable items in the narrative. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, it is also important to note that she underlines having established residence in Cincinnati where her rich wardrobe is permanently and securely stored. In addition, while she is evidently frustrated with the office, she does not imply or assume that the gentlemen’s disbelief in her wealth could possibly be a consequence of their racial prejudices. Potter, once again, defines herself as a “working woman” with no written indications of her racial heritage.

Potter’s wardrobe serves as more than just a fashion statement here. The price tags on her pieces appear to strengthen her self-confidence and provide her an admirable sense of superiority over the railroad workers who continue to put her off and disregard her demands of fair payment for a number of days. Potter does not give up, however, and she finds her way into the railroad president’s office to resolve the conflict: “I, not being afraid of anybody, determined to see the president myself...Though he did not give me what I thought was sufficient to repay my losses, yet he gave me more than the others were willing to allow” (63). Potter’s fashionable body does not shirk from taking up space. This body is worthy of consumable adornments and it actively demands respectful treatment.
Just as she raises her voice figuratively (but perhaps literally as well) loud and clear in response to what she believes to be an insult, she dresses up her black working woman’s body in flamboyance. Evidently, she does not attempt to be “invisible” in public. Indeed, she takes pride in high-quality pieces of fabric – not worn or afforded by “ordinary” women such as Mr. F.’s wife. The valuable dresses that wrap around the body of the hairdresser function as a social statement. Her belonging cannot be divorced from the body, the body that manipulates and is manipulated simultaneously.

Conclusion

Eliza Potter’s mid-nineteenth-century entrepreneurial black female body does not fall under dominant categories and definitions of blackness in antebellum America. *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* is not a narrative of racialized resistance. Potter does not respond to criticism that studies her work for strict definitions and limiting categories of black literary expression. In this chapter, I demonstrated Potter’s paradoxical mobility rooted in her fragile relationship with Cincinnati and its people, who are skeptical of her membership in their Queen City (just as contemporary readers might be skeptical of her contribution to African-American literary traditions).

*A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* disappoints scholars who search for evidence of abolitionist rhetoric, activist resistance in response to collective victimization. However, lack of such elements does not prove Potter insignificant or passive. Instead, her work demands revised methods of critical analysis: studying Potter’s belonging suggests an alternative to critical equations of blackness with resistance that are rigid and limiting. I explored productive tensions of Potter’s stability and mobility, belonging and resistance, to demonstrate alternative ways of reading an exceptional story. In my discussion of Potter,
I articulated her literary strategies and spatial patterns of bodily movement to ultimately argue that these elements are fluid and in constant becoming. Potter’s belonging, inherently tied to her material and intangible circumstances, is not a passive acquiescence. Her belonging, productively paradoxical as preceding pages emphasize, actively disrupts strict definitions of blackness in American literary history.
CHAPTER THREE
THIRTY YEARS BUT FOUR CHAPTERS A SLAVE:
ELIZABETH KECKLEY’S BEHIND THE SCENES

Introduction

The second chapter in Where We Belong, “Traces of Eliza Potter,” explored Eliza Potter’s paradoxical belonging rooted in the simultaneity of movement and stability. I argued that studying Potter’s belonging offered productive alternatives to dominant racialized categories of blackness and resistance. In that chapter’s discussion, elements of space and place are central: Potter’s autobiographical persona, the real woman who lived in blood and flesh, and the spaces she lived through and literarily represented come together through the critical lenses of belonging.

Developing on this dissertation’s principal exploration of spatiality and belonging, this chapter studies Elizabeth Keckley’s (or Keckly) Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (1868). While the first chapter focuses on spatiality through literary representations of the autobiographical self, this chapter turns to the spatiality of the text itself, which refers to both material and more abstract elements associated with the production and consumption of the text in print. Material organization of the book, with chapters printed in ink on paper, and semantic characteristics are fundamentally important to my research because they shape the literary experience of the reader. A printed book has tangible dimensions. In addition to the corresponding physical

50 The majority of documented Keckley research since the nineteenth century spells the auto/biographer’s last name with an “e.” Yet, Jennifer Fleischner’s important archival discovery reveals that “she spelled her name differently from the way it appears in her published memoir and in the history books. She spelled it ‘Keckly,’ not ‘Keckley’...I also noticed that when she signed her first name she wrote ‘Lizzy,’ not ‘Lizzie,’ as Mary Lincoln spelled it” (7).
51 Reading is an act that has shaped and has been shaped by the evolving technology of books. In his study of the genealogy of this literary medium, Robert Darnton points out a seemingly obvious but often overlooked
contact, human interaction with a book involves abstract social concepts that play inherent role in the production of book-space.52

*Behind the Scenes* creates an ongoing space by and for Keckley: the book becomes a material and social site occupied by Keckley’s first-person narrator. Through the narrative, the autobiographer can (and does) re-script the corporeal body, its past experiences, silences and invisibilities into a literary body with voice. The book, as a genre with preexisting practice guidelines, provides Keckley the space to explore her capacity for expression. The book becomes a space for the body to be heard. Building on the premise that spatiality of the text embodies tangible and immaterial elements, I study *Behind the Scenes* as a spatial medium created by and for Keckley. This chapter aims to understand elements of Keckley’s belonging, inextricable with the publication.53 I use the term belonging here and in the following pages to emphasize the inextricable relation of the two: socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion.54 Reading the narrative through the lenses of

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52 The production of space is Henri Lefebvre’s well-known theoretical study. The term gives his book its title. In his sophisticated study, Lefebvre explains the production of space with his conceptual triad which builds on the premise that “space is a social product” (26). According to his triad, “the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be connected so that…the individual member of a given social group may move from one to another without confusion – so much is a logical necessity” (40). Lived space is lived through signs, symbols and images: language used to code and decipher a narrative, for example. Conceived space means the mental knowledge of space that is largely shaped by dominant discourses or narratives outside the individual. Perceived space is the exchange value: physical reality. One of the fundamental studies in social geography, Lefebvre’s book closes the rift between abstract space and physical space. A book, according to Lefebvre, would be considered a “representational space…as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (39, emphasis in the original).

53 The critical intersection of material and intangible elements of books and reading has attracted scholarly attention in other areas as well – especially in the field of Renaissance drama. For instance, according to Jonathan Walker, “interpreting…physical characteristics literally requires that we closely attend to the eye’s habits of reading – how it scans the page, moves along lines of text, absorbs data in particular sequences, and both registers and disregards textual aspects according to disciplinary procedures of reading” (203).

54 Keckley’s complex socio-economic goals are tied directly to her manual labor and dressmaking for the clients who belong to higher-class categories and privileges. Keckley’s professional contributions to those
spatiality of belonging, I investigate the bodily existence of Keckley recreated and represented within the published and circulated work.

This literary space Keckley directly or indirectly claimed has been a controversial one, then and now. Scholars have been attracted to her exceptional work (in a number of ways discussed below) – especially because of the book’s divergence from the prevailing literary history of nineteenth-century African American women. Keckley’s work does not follow genre conventions of ex-slave narratives; it does not overtly make arguments for and about a collective African-American consciousness in mid-nineteenth century United States. In fact, reading *Behind the Scenes* for an undisputable critique of chattel slavery, which Keckley was a victim of for thirty years, would be in vain. She does, after all, emphasize repeatedly in the narrative that “slavery had its dark side as well as its bright side” (Keckley 12). In this chapter, I build my analysis on such complexities to ultimately argue that the narrative itself as a site created due to and despite dominant (and racialized) structures of post-war American geography presents provocative elements of belonging that oscillate back and forth between bondage and freedom. Reading Keckley through her creation reveals boundaries of her slave past carried into a legally-free future.

*Behind the Scenes* is not a conventional ex-slave narrative. As William Andrews rightfully explores, it can better be categorized as an “experiment” (xi). It productively challenges the sub-genre of ex-slave self-life narratives that detail “graphic definitions of inhuman suffering, intrepid escapes to freedom, and dedication to the antislavery cause”

circles are strictly conditional. Similar to Potter, her body is granted access to exclusive spaces so long as her labor has an exchange value. For Keckley, dressmaking functioned as a social currency that helped her purchase her freedom after being enslaved for thirty years and opened for her the doors to the White House.  

In this chapter, I will be referring to the 2005 Penguin edition of *Behind the Scenes.*  

According to Andrews, “[t]he first important ex-slave autobiography to be published after slavery had been abolished, *Behind the Scenes* was a notable experiment, for which there were few, if any, models and almost no direct predecessors” (xi).  

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Behind the Scenes does include limited sketches of similar aforementioned details, but those remain marginal to the narrative broadly. Contrary to conventional genre expectations, Keckley is not central to her own narrative. As I analyze further in the following pages, Keckley limits three decades of her life to brief four chapters in admitted determination to “pass rapidly over the stirring events of [her] entire life” (13).

The book begins with a largely misleading statement that centers on the author: “My life has been an eventful one. I was born a slave…therefore I came upon the earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action” (7). Yet, Keckley and her thirty years remain peripheral to the narrative. Her unmistakably marginal existence in her own life-narrative is symmetrical to her social negotiations: like her belonging in places and social circles dominated by higher-class elite, her belonging in her own book is elusive. Her paradoxical relationship to her own self-life narrative is evident from the beginning: As she writes Mary Lincoln’s life behind the scenes of her husband’s presidency, she simultaneously remains behind the scenes of this narrative. As I argue throughout this chapter, Keckley’s precarious visibility in the narrative strategically increases her impactful presence.

I refer to Behind the Scenes as Keckley’s work, narrative or creation throughout this chapter, while acknowledging sophisticated arguments that approach the text’s authenticity with skepticism. Proponents of the thesis that consider Behind the Scenes as a product of ghostwriting build arguments on relatively strong evidence that rests in Keckley’s background and the historical timeframe. There has been scholarly reluctance to acknowledge Keckley as the primary or only writer of the book. The first edition of the book includes a penciled annotation with the name James Redpath as the ghostwriter.
(Figure 5). Yet, this anonymous (likely written by a librarian) post-production mark has not been historically proven. As the records of Virginia Historical Society underline, “Keckley may have used a ghostwriter, although not the name in the handwritten annotation on the title page of this first edition” (“Elizabeth Keckley”). As this document and other relevant research demonstrates, Keckley’s authorship continue to be under scrutiny in the twenty-first century.57

For instance, in her 2003 article, Barbara Ryan bases her argument entirely on the “distinction between a person named Elizabeth Keckley and the text called Behind the Scenes” (43). Correspondingly, emphasizing historical unclarity about the work, Susan S. Williams underlines literary manipulation the publication is thought to have gone through by the known editor, Redpath: “Although the publication history of Behind the
While I follow lines of cautious explorations of the book’s history, I am unwilling to build my argument on this historical uncertainty that arbitrarily divorces Keckley from *Behind the Scenes*. More importantly, focusing on this division implies that the text itself is a finished product. Alternatively, I argue in this chapter that *Behind the Scenes* is a process that is shaped by Keckley and that shapes her becoming simultaneously.\(^{58}\) It is a process primarily because interpretations of the work are ongoing and limitless as the book continues to occupy concrete and digital libraries. Keckley’s belonging is built on the contested foundations of socio-spatial relations; the book, *Behind the Scenes*, embodies and demonstrates tangible and immaterial elements of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion.

**“To Defend Myself”**

On October 12, 1867, less than a year prior to the publication of Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes*, *The Evening Telegraph* published the article below (Figure 6). Following a detailed financial assessment of the Lincolns, this article concluded that “the people of the nation may not suppose Mrs. Lincoln is in anything like destitute circumstances. Her income may not be sufficient to meet all her wants and necessities, but it is certainly large enough to maintain her at least as comfortably as she lived before going to Washington” ("Mr. Lincoln’s Estate"). Following President Lincoln’s assassination, Mary Lincoln’s spending habits and financial instability became a subject of public interest. Related rumors surrounding the former First Lady echoed across the nation as the “Old Clothes Scandal.”

\(^{58}\) Even if further biographical research after the time of this dissertation presents evidence to prove against her authorship, the book will continue to present sketches from her life. I will, therefore, refer to Keckley as the writer of the book because documented history does not suggest otherwise.
The Evening Telegraph article quoted above exemplifies the public scrutiny Mary Lincoln was under at the time – even before her attempt to sell her wardrobe in New York became public knowledge.

As Mary Lincoln’s biographer Jean H. Baker notes: “during the fall of 1867, wherever she went the scandal followed. For weeks every newspaper in the nation had something to say” (Baker 277). Mrs. Lincoln became the center of national attention as an

Figure 6. “Mr. Lincoln’s Estate.” From The Evening Telegraph. Col VIII No 89. Philadelphia. Saturday, October 12, 1867
undesirable consequence of her failed incognito sales trip to New York (Figure 7). With
the help of her trusted seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln went to New York “in
the early evening of September 16, 1867…Mary Lincoln was traveling incognito as Mrs.
Clarke of Chicago” (Baker 272). Having predicted potential disapproving reactions, Mary
Lincoln preferred to disguise her identity during this infamous trip. The creator of her
expensive fashion-statement dresses, Keckley, accompanied the former First Lady – not
because she genuinely and voluntarily desired to, but because she was unable to decline
her lady’s demand. She was obliged to attend largely due to her racialized class-position
and the correspondingly asymmetrical-relationship between the two women. As I discuss
further in the following pages, Mary Lincoln extended her conclusive invitation to
Keckley: the unconventional couple of friends met in New York City to execute the secret
mission, which soon failed and ignited the big national gossip about President Lincoln’s
widow. Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln unsuccessfully attempted to sell the dresses that not only
adorned the First Lady’s biological body but also played a key role in her public
performance and social reception. Keckley made the dresses that were inextricable from
the national narrative of the First Lady.

When her identity and actions were revealed when she tried to sell her “diamond
ring inscribed with her name,” Mrs. Lincoln immediately became a target of public scrutiny
and judgement (Baker 273). Government officials in their social circles, friends, media,
and fellow citizens questioned the motives behind her efforts to sell her personal
belongings. In the end, she not only failed to raise money through sales, but she also
became publicly humiliated. The image of Mary Lincoln was damaged by the power of
rhetoric. Newspaper articles (such as Figure 6) and gossip circulated in public created a narrative that undeniably negatively affected the former First Lady.

Mary Lincoln had to send her clothes to auctions in the city. Arguably her most intimate belongings, dresses that materially covered her biological body parts with feminine virtue, were now on display for their new potential customers. Figure 7 demonstrates Mary Lincoln’s wardrobe scattered around a room with strangers (to her) touching and evaluating the articles in the former First Lady’s absence. Not only her financial aptitude but more importantly her virtue is evidently under American scrutiny, as this image demonstrates. Layers of her custom-made dresses represent female sexuality: with her identity revealed and wardrobe scattered on display, Mary was shamefully

exposed – as the two half-naked statues framing this image reminds the audience. Her clothes materially reveal her unique bodily form as the dresses are tailored to her measurements. It is no coincidence that this portrayal of the New York exhibition symbolically alludes to female sexuality with the statues and the large yonic symbol on the wall, center of the background. The eye catches the symbol first before moving down to the human figures in this space. The particular items for sale are obscured and unidentifiable individually. Mary’s privacy – bodily and social – is violated here through such representations. As this image exemplifies, Mary Lincoln’s clothes as well as she herself lost significant respect in the eyes of the American public during this time. As for the central inquiry of this chapter, Keckley’s connection to this scene is significant. She is the labor behind the tangible commodities scrutinized by the potential buyers/bidders. The dresses she individually made by hand over long hours of physical labor are piled on top of each other. Through her work on display, Keckley is simultaneously present and invisible in this space.

While the goal of this chapter is not to explore Mary Lincoln’s scandal, this historical moment is crucial in order to understand where Keckley and *Behind the Scenes* stand. The same scandal that socially damaged Mary Lincoln created the publication opportunity Keckley seized: within a year, her book appeared in print. In the preface to *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley explains the historical moment as a clear justification for the book: “Had Mrs. Lincoln’s acts never become public property [sic], I should not have

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59 I am using the term “yonic” here as in opposition to “phallic.” OED defines “yoni” as “a figure or symbol of the female organ of generation” (“Yoni, n.”).

60 While there might be parallelisms to Marxist materialism this discussion might call to mind, I am more interested in understanding Keckley’s belonging through both tangible and intangible elements. Unlike new materialist (such as Jane Bennett’s) theories that help analyze Keckley’s paradoxical presence through material commodities, according to Marxist materialism, objects/things do not have agency unless the proletariat unite.
published to the world the secret chapters of her life” (6). The word “secret” is one of the most repeated words in *Behind the Scenes*. Five of those thirteen places appear in Keckley’s introduction to the book. Claiming to write her book in defense of the former First Lady, Keckley is both a victim and beneficiary of the scandal in question. Her book, as this statement confirms, functions as a literary exhibition of Mary Lincoln’s privacy. In a literary context and a book-space, the national audience is invited to sort through, consume, and circulate details revealed. With this disclaimer, Keckley offers open admission to some exclusive scenes from the First Lady’s life she had the privilege to witness during her engagements with the Lincoln family. Publicizing confidential affairs, Keckley demonstrates awareness of questions *Behind the Scenes* could attract – especially regarding her ethics and authorial motives. Although Keckley implies that she would not have considered publishing the First Lady’s life details under different circumstances, she does not adopt an apologetic tone for her decision to write and distribute *Behind the Scenes*. Instead, she presents the work as a literary defense against public accusations of Mrs. Lincoln.

Keckley, evidently, is aware that the act of writing and publishing the book might have irreversible consequences for their relationship. And, more importantly, she presents this defensive response as a conditional necessity. Keckley explains: “to defend myself I must defend the lady I have served” (5). She accepts her name and reputation as directly bound with Mrs. Lincoln’s. Keckley presents this defensive literary reaction as an urgent strategy. She is concerned about her own reputation as Mrs. Lincoln’s seamstress. This title

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61 While from her introduction it is evident that Keckley is aware of the consequences, biographical evidence provided by Fleischner shows that the impact of the publication proved to be worse than Keckley would have expected. According to Fleischner, “she never got over falling-out with Mary Lincoln. She made a quilt out of pieces of Mary’s dresses, but if she planned to present it to her, she never had the chance” (324).
helped her in her career and stood out as a profitable recognition more than any other personal or professional connection—prior to the scandal. Her admitted motives were rooted in her desire to challenge doubts about “whether [she] was really worth [her] salt or not” (20). As the narrative presents, she conceptualizes her integrity to be in critical interdependence with Mrs. Lincoln’s truth. Her professional reputation, financial future, authorship, and audience rely heavily on this strategy of subordination. Here, Keckley shows a conventionally victimizing concept adopted as empowerment of human agency.62 In order to “defend [herself],” in other words, Keckley determines to be secondary to her lady and her story. Her determination to remain her lady’s subordinate paradoxically goes hand-in-hand with her being the primary credible writer of the book, which predictably costs Keckley their intimate (but largely one-way) connection. It is, of course, Keckley’s subservience to Mrs. Lincoln that grants her access to confidential knowledge.

While the narrative exhibits unseen fractions from Mary Lincoln’s life events, Keckley censors a significant portion of her own story. Contrary to what the full title of the book implies, the narrative embodies logical and material gaps about the author herself. In *Behind the Scenes*, as a site by and for Keckley, the disappearance of the body—as much as the appearance—needs to be highlighted. The first four chapters of the book provide largely isolated and selective sketches of her years in slavery (as I further discuss later in this chapter) and how she obtains her freedom. Yet, the rest of narrative centers on the White House, in which Keckley’s body almost disappears “behind the scenes.” In similar ways to Eliza Potter, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Keckley remains absent in plain

62 I would like to clarify here that my understanding of agency in this chapter (and dissertation) cannot be divorced from human and nonhuman, tangible and abstract elements. Here, with the term “human agency,” I aim to emphasize the instability of concepts such as insubordination.
sight in the majority of the book. Especially during the White House chapters, her hands attend her work while her ears record witnessed details and interactions between President Lincoln and the First Lady. Even in her recreations of such incidents as the night in New York, where Keckley is the primary focus, she removes the body from the scene, as I explore in greater detail ahead.

The reader finds Keckley as the observer behind the scenes of the White House – not as a participant. As she works on preparing dresses, life goes on in the rooms of the house. The presence of Elizabeth’s body, in rooms occupied by Mary Todd and President Lincoln, is unobtrusive. Keckley records: “often Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln discussed the relations of cabinet officers and gentlemen prominent in politics, in my presence” (57). While she is not a part of conversations she listens to, her body remains present and physically active. Her skilled hands move over cloths, needles, and threads, while her eyes and ears record people and their interactions. Keckley has access to the “secret history” due her relative invisibility. Her black female body goes unnoticed in the rooms where American politics are a daily conversation between the President and the First Lady. While her presence in the White House is not accidental (it is a result of her connections, hard work, and persistence), traits unique to Elizabeth Keckley are insignificant and irrelevant in this context. The White-House seamstress is easily replaceable. Contrary to an immediate judgement of her position, however, it is exactly her disadvantaged situation that serves her profitably. Keckley devotes “a rambling chapter” to some days in the White House, where she listens to conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln without making a single comment or remind them that her body occupies the same space with theirs. Describing a morning scene at the White House, Keckley writes, “Mr. Lincoln was sitting

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in a chair reading a paper, stroking with one hand the head of Little Tad. I was basting a
dress for Mrs. Lincoln. A servant entered and handed the President a letter” (58). Keckley
devotes the next couple of pages following this quote to a recreated dialog between the
President and the First Lady. While she positions her body in the room to set the scene, her
presence is minor in the majority of this chapter. She lets the leading characters act out
their roles – as if this is a theatrical text/performance. Elizabeth’s role in the scene is sewing
in the background, almost as a prop who can easily be replaced by another black female
body. This substitutability/invisibility is what gives Keckley the “privilege” she claims.
Her role(s) in the scenes is always in the background with no line to deliver.

Even though Keckley introduces herself as Mrs. Lincoln’s confidante, details in
the narrative suggest an imbalanced relationship between the two. Race and class
differences continue to determine Keckley’s position – physically and socially – even
through Mrs. Lincoln arguably appears ignorant or naïve towards such realities.

Her Story Confined

Keckley’s relationship to her past is evidently complicated. Correspondingly, the
book actively censors or obscures some key personal memories. A surface-level
observation of the narrative reveals the unbalanced structure that materially and logically
shapes the book. More specifically, the title of the book discloses Keckley’s thirty years
lived in bondage while only (by comparison) four years in the White House as a daily
attendant. In her literary site, however, there is room for only four chapters on slavery – in
a fifteen-chapter narrative.63 Keckley glosses over details of her life events that begin with

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63 In the 2005 Penguin edition of the book, four chapters correspond to 26 pages (pp. 7-33) in 157 total pages
(pp. 7-164) – excluding the Preface.
her birth in “Dinwiddie Court-House in Virginia,” and continue in Washington after obtaining her freedom in 1855 (3). Keckley’s evident self-suppression of her life details should not be interpreted as a sign of her lacking self-worth, however. To the contrary, as I argue and demonstrate in this section, the existing gaps or obscured elements paradoxically function as self-assertive strategies. Mary Lincoln takes up relatively more pages because Keckley wishes to minimize her textual impact and strengthen her literary authority simultaneously.

From the opening pages of the narrative, Keckley determines to limit the space her story takes in the book – literally and figuratively. The less room Keckley and her incidents take up in her narrative, the more time and space she dedicates to the Lincolns and the White House circles. Therefore, missing chapters from Keckley’s life are not accidental. She makes a deliberative literary decision to exclude what she calls “many strange passages in [her] history” (3). She explains: “[A]s I am not writing altogether the history of myself, I will confine my story to the most important incidents which I believe influenced the moulding of my character” (3). Her use of the word “confine” captures my curiosity in this statement. Her minimal meditations on her own life get insufficient recognition and corresponding page count. She does, in the primary denotation of the word, confine her self-representation spatially in her own literary creation.

Paradoxically, she determines her first and only self-life narrative published to be a place of censorship and self-restriction. Some details of her personal story are determined to be worthy of mention only if they support the credibility of the (auto)biographer.64 Keckley, as both narrator and character, belongs in her own narrative as long as she can

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64 As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, I refer to Keckley’s work as (auto)biographical to underline the duality of Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln’s life stories in one narrative.
make a strong case for her strong personality, or “character,” as she puts it. It is important for Keckley to demonstrate her value as an individual to her social circles. Her determined argument for her worth can be seen as a lifelong reaction to early skepticism in her capabilities. Keckley writes: “when even fourteen years old, that I would never be worth my salt” (8, emphasis added). She evidently carries this notion of “being worth her salt” with her even in later years of her life. She repeats the same phrase later in the book to emphasize her work ethic in comparison to people who are born into wealth and comfort: “While I was working so hard that others might live in comparative comfort, and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance, the thought often occurred to me whether I was really worth my salt or not; and then perhaps the lips curled with a bitter sneer” (20). It is despite and due to this “bitter sneer” that Keckley writes. She wants her book to prove her capabilities against doubts and disbeliefs. Systematically intangible skepticism against her character is one of the key motivators for her writing.

While structural distribution of chapters indicates a clear hierarchical order between the characters in the narrative that are re-creations of real-life people – Elizabeth and Mary – the spatial imbalance is not a symptom of the writer’s amnesia. In fact, Keckley admits remembering incidents so vividly that she finds it to be a painful experience to express in writing. She records her father’s obligatory separation from his family “as if it were but yesterday,” for example (9). She states in the first paragraph of the opening chapter: “[A]s I sit alone in my room the brain is busy and a rapidly moving panorama brings scene after scene before me…The visions are so terribly distinct that I almost imagine them to be real” (7). Keckley’s act of writing her memories intensifies her reminiscing. While in isolation in her room, her past appears to be largely unsettling. The traumatizing experiences (only
very few of which she includes in the book) resurface so vividly that Keckley’s concept of
time (and reality) reportedly becomes fluid.

Remembering the past and recording it is largely a chaotic and emotionally
exhausting experience for her. She describes the act of remembering as if she has no power
over the experience, but she practices the power over the narrative. Her restless mind
“brings scene after scene before [her]” (7). She rides a roller coaster of emotions beyond
her control. Keckley deceptively excites the reader momentarily: “Every day seems like a
romance within itself, and the years grow into ponderous volumes” (7). The book, where
the reader reads these lines, does not feature details about those years since Keckley
determines to leave out more than what is included: “As I cannot condense, I must omit
many strange passages in my history” (7). Although her passivity in the face of her
figuratively paralyzing affect could be interpreted as disempowering, reading these gaps
throughout the book emphasizes her deliberate absence strategized for authorial agency.
She repeatedly informs the reader that she does not want to “dwell upon” her undesirable
slavery memories (19). For instance, excluding countless years from the narrative, she
jumps to the chapter that explains her path to final freedom. Keckley writes: “The years
passed and brought many changes to me, but on those I will not dwell, as I wish to hasten
to the most interesting part of my story” (19). Since she intentionally presents selective
content from those thirty years of her life, she has to determine what should be shared with
the readers “[f]rom such wilderness of events” (7).

Keckley’s literary presence in her own narrative is largely underwhelming. Her
experiences before meeting Mrs. Lincoln are glossed over and underdeveloped. She
 spatially occupies considerably less room than the former First Lady in the narrative.
Awareness of her audience, with whom Keckley wants her book to belong, plays an important role in the disproportional spatial arrangement of the book. As William Andrews notes, “Keckley as an African American woman and former slave was quite aware that few of her readers, especially those who were white, could imagine any contribution or significance that a woman of color could make to American history” (xv). Keckley’s belonging in American history and literature – guarded by arbitrarily racialized ideologies – was rooted in demonstrating and justifying her presence to her dominantly white readers. Yet, her obscured details do not suggest any lack of self-esteem. It is not accidental that her slavery years are glossed over in four brief chapters. Paradoxically, it is largely these gaps that continue to strengthen the impact of *Behind the Scenes*.

Even the most pivotal moments of her life are hastily written and unremarkably inserted into the narrative. For instance, her son makes brief – and nondescript – appearances in her writing. With difficulty, she explains her pregnancy that happens without her consent: “I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man – I spare the world his name – had base [sic] designs upon me…and I – I – became a mother” (16). Keckley’s motherhood, as this quote demonstrates, is a result of her undesirable circumstances under chattel slavery. This is one of the most vulnerable moments with long-term consequences for her (and her baby). Her use of dashes that split the “I” show not only rhetorical hesitation but also her silences – both in the narrative and in life. Asserting motherhood in the first person, Keckley is evidently reluctant. The repetition creates a stutter effect that slows down her prose with the weight of this statement. She leaves out several relevant details regarding the sexual assault and her pregnancy. The evident hesitation and omitted information might lead to conclusions that
she is self-minimizing here. Yet, at the same time, she chooses and orders words and punctuation to manipulate reader interactions with the text. The pace of reading determined by the author intensifies the literary impact of the incident.

Keckley did not willingly choose to become a mother. But, her writing is deliberative. Especially knowing her admitted determination to “omit” a very significant portion of her life in the book, the reader understands the significance of this memory through its subtly poignant depiction. Keckley does not write these lines to beg for the reader’s pity, however. Her expression here is a straightforward documentation of her memories. Although she is not making a political case against a larger system that positioned enslaved women (and men) in inevitable vulnerability, she blurs lines between her agency and victimization through the entirety of the narrative confines.65 These two terms are intertwined in Keckley’s use of subservience as a strategy of agency.

Keckley, having no other alternative, acquiesces to maternity without accepting blame for her extramarital child. She writes: “if my poor boy ever suffered any humiliation pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life; he must blame the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position” (16, emphasis added). This very brief confessional section is not an apology but a sincere account of a woman whose abuse

65 Several nineteenth-century scholars have noted similarities between Harriet Jacobs, who published Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl seven years before Behind the Scenes, and Keckley. Although their biographical and literary differences are greater than their commonalities, thinking about the two contemporaneous African American women in the context of motherhood and agency productively complicates the discussion. While Keckley does not apologize or take the blame for the crime that confines her into the biological and social role of motherhood, Jacobs obligatorily chooses (a desperate paradox) pregnancy under undesirable circumstances to lessen the high threat of sexual assault by her master, Dr. Flint (Jacobs).
remained invisible but justified for many years. Keckley effectively turns the table here: she creates a moment of discomfort for the reader who is presumably considered a member or participant in “that society,” which is not limited to a geographical location on a map. It is also important to note her self-alienating choice of pronouns in this quote. Keckley switches from first person to third person when predicting a future for her son (already dead at the time of her writing). She wants her audience to understand that she would not have desired to give birth to a child into slavery if she had the privilege to decide. She writes herself into the statement above as “she” and “his mother,” indicating the alienating nature of this obligatory and burdensome journey for the two – from the moment she conceived. Her hesitant articulation of the “I” and “mother” in the same sentence and referring to herself in the third person are not accidental. While she does not disown her now-martyr son, she distances herself from the identity of motherhood and perhaps some responsibilities that come with this title. She is not simply a victim minimizing her self-worth. To the contrary, her writing actively obscures details to maximize her effective presence simultaneously.

In the book, the loss of her son is as unremarkable as her becoming a mother. Keckley records her son’s death as an afterthought. She glosses over:

Previous to this [Willie Lincoln’s death] I had lost my son. Leaving Wilberforce, he went to the battle-field with the three months troops, and he was killed in Missouri…It was a sad blow to me, and the kind womanly letter that Mrs. Lincoln

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66 Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, this passage and others in the book that provide glimpses of Keckley’s confessional utterance of sexual abuse are highly timely and relevant to what is now globally known as the #metoo movement.
wrote to me when she heard my bereavement was full of golden words of comfort.

(47)

Keckley’s grief is condensed into this very brief paragraph. Compared to Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln’s son Willie Lincoln, whose illness and death takes up a chapter of its own – titled “Willie Lincoln’s Death Bed” – Keckley’s son’s name, life, and death remain spatially insignificant (using less page-space) in the narrative. Keckley includes every little detail she remembers about Willie: how his parents loved him and how much his death pained them. “Mrs. Lincoln’s grief was inconsolable,” Keckley writes (46). President Lincoln was also deeply affected by his son’s suffering and death: “I never saw a man so bowed down with grief,” Keckley observes (46). Keckley shows in detail how both parents loved and cared for their son. Witnessing their suffering during this difficult time allowed Keckley to observe an unknown but relatable side of both the President and the First Lady. Willie was evidently loved during his short life. His funeral, correspondingly, expressed the deep grief of the Lincolns. While Keckley’s George never had a funeral or a grave, Willie’s “funeral was very touching…With his bright face, and his apt greetings and replies, he was remembered in every part of that crimson-curtained hall” (48). The contrast between the two boys is unmistakable. Once again, the spatial imbalance, in terms of word/page-count, determined by the author herself demonstrates internalized structures of socio-racial hierarchies.

Keckley prioritizes Mrs. Lincoln’s grief and suffering over her own throughout the chapters. Just as she describes Mrs. Lincoln as a suffering mother after her child’s death,

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67 William Andrews, in his notes to the Penguin edition of Behind the Scenes, explains that “Wilberforce is the nation’s oldest historically black university” (166n26). In addition, Keckley’s son, George Hobbs, “enlisted in the Union army as a white man under the name of George W. D. Kirkland and dies on August 10, 1861, at the Battle of Wilson’s Creek” (166n27).
she also emphasizes the First Lady’s grief following President Lincoln’s assassination. As Keckley describes, Mrs. Lincoln is not only saddened because of the two traumatic losses, but also because she now must leave the White House prematurely. Keckley records Mrs. Lincoln’s thoughts and emotions in direct quotes from the former First Lady:

After the President’s funeral Mrs. Lincoln rallied, and began to make preparations to leave the White House. One day she suddenly exclaimed: ‘God, Elizabeth, what a change! Did ever woman have to suffer so much and experience so great a change…I should like to live for my sons, but life is so full of misery that I would rather die. And then she would go off into a fit of hysterics. (88)

Keckley does not add her commentary to this passage. Instead, she abruptly closes the chapter with this statement. Yet, it is hard to be convinced by Keckley’s determined silence here: her figurative stillness does not equate to an agreement with Mrs. Lincoln’s words. That is, as a former-slave woman who survives multiple degrees of physical and emotional suffering, Keckley would know that there are, in fact, many women who “suffer so much” or more. Of course, Mrs. Lincoln goes through some highly challenging circumstances: having to leave the White House as a grieving widow who also lost her son is not an easy experience to bear. Yet, even by knowing Keckley’s brief history shared in the narrative, the reader would understand that it is highly unlikely for her to think Mary Lincoln possibly suffered more than her in life. This passage also effectively demonstrates fundamental differences between the two women: while Mary Lincoln is focused solely on herself in a highly selfish manner, according to Keckley’s literary representation, Keckley appears to be a self-aware woman with a high degree of social intelligence and empathy for others.
When Mrs. Lincoln did not have the need or money for Keckley’s dressmaking services, Keckley relied on her other personal qualities: primarily her reliability and largely quiet company. Keckley’s commitment to the Lincolns took precedence over her own personal life and professional career. Built on historically familiar and unbalanced foundations of race and class relations, the unusual relationship between the two restricted the entrepreneurial woman’s independence and freedom.

In the narrative, her obligatory journey to the West with Mrs. Lincoln appears as a clear evidence of this claim. As Mrs. Lincoln left the White House, “[i]t had been arranged that I should go to Chicago,” Keckley writes (92). Her possible plans for herself and her business that might interfere with this arrangement are evidently negligible: Keckley’s worries about her business prove to be minor in the eyes of Mrs. Lincoln. Keckley explains: “When Mrs. Lincoln first suggested her plan, I strongly objected but I had been with her so long that she had acquired great power over me” (92). Leaving D.C., Mary Lincoln did not have the need for a seamstress or the ability to afford one. Her forceful demand for Keckley’s companionship shows that the relationship was built on one-sided and imbalanced foundations.

After their departure from the White House, Keckley stays with Mrs. Lincoln and her sons, Robert and Tad, at a lake house in Illinois. While in D.C. she attended the White House daily or regularly while maintaining her own apartment, in Illinois she has to stay with the Lincolns for some time. During this period, Keckley attends their daily lives in the house and learns more about their family dynamics. She records her observations from those days and shares details about Robert and Tad in addition to and in relation to Mrs. Lincoln. Building on her accumulated knowledge about the Lincolns during the years in
the White House, Keckley details observed differences between the two sons: “Tad had always been much humored by his parents…He suffered from a slight impediment in his speech, and had never been made to go to school” (95). This seemingly insignificant detail is central not just to the long chapter Keckley devotes to Tad and his academic challenges but also to Keckley’s daily engagements in Illinois. While Robert attended school daily, Mrs. Lincoln homeschooled the younger Tad, Keckley explains. In the narrative, Keckley witnesses one of these homeschool sessions and devotes a lengthy section of her book to this incident. Underlining that this recollection occupies about three pages in the book holds a spatial significance in this chapter. The spatial dedication is significant especially when juxtaposed against Keckley’s earlier memories and her own son which are intentionally glossed over in a few sentences or a short paragraph.

The incident she chooses to detail at this point in the chapter, which focuses on Mary Lincoln’s life after the White House, refers to Tad’s academic struggles – primarily with fundamental literacy skills. As Keckley discloses, Tad is evidently unable to learn and practice elementary reading and writing principles in English. He not only is intellectually limited, but he is also a challenging student who appears unwilling to admit mistakes and learn from them. In an example Keckley unpacks in her chapter, she demonstrates that it takes some time and work finally “convincing Tad that A-p-e does not spell monkey” (97). Watching Tad and Mrs. Lincoln interact in the same room all three occupy, Keckley finds the scene humorous: “I could no longer restrain myself and burst out laughing,” she writes (96). This involuntary reaction is not welcomed by Tad. Keckley explains: “Tad looked very much offended, and I hastened to say: ‘I beg your pardon, Master Tad; I hope that you will excuse my want of politeness’” (96). Keckley unmistakably addresses the young
Lincoln as ‘Master’ here. In fact, she refers to him with the same title in the narrative – even when she is not quoting their dialogues. Such moments in the narrative emphasize the hierarchically lower position of Keckley in the house. Even as a legally free woman who owns her own business, she is obligated to serve and respect her lady and her sons. Yet, her narrative style that clearly appeals to humor strategically changes the historical and literary effect of the term “master.” The cathartic laughter is irrepresible. So is Keckley’s writing. Unlike her genuine laughter, the use of “master” is unfitting in this context since Tad certainly has not mastered reading skills. Through the affective narrative, Keckley demonstrates strategies to make her audience laugh along and strengthen her self-assertion and insubordination accordingly.

Keckley’s laughter manipulates this portion of the narrative to draw attention to discriminatory practices disfavoring non-white populations with similar learning difficulties. Keckley recognizes that Mary Lincoln’s individualized patience towards Tad’s academic limitations exemplify larger racial biases and generalizations. Reflecting on Tad’s failure to differentiate between two distinct words in English (“ape” and “monkey”), Keckley writes: “Whenever I think of this incident I am tempted to laugh; and then it occurs to me that had Tad been a negro boy, not the son of a President, and so difficult to instruct, he would have been called thick-skulled, and would have been held up as an example of the inferiority of race” (97). Tad, as a school-aged boy who is academically and intellectually behind for his age group, would have been treated differently, Keckley

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68 Keckley continues to refer to Tad Lincoln as “Master Tad” in the following paragraph even when she is not writing a direct quote addressed to him during a conversation (96).
69 A detailed glimpse of Tad’s homeschooling in the narrative highlights traditionally admirable aspects about Mrs. Lincoln’s motherhood. Keckley portrays her as an attentive, caring, and patient mother who devotes time and energy to her children – even during difficult times.
rightfully argues. While Tad’s mistakes and inadequate learning abilities can be humored as trivial confusions of a white privileged child, racial injustices would have long-term negative consequences – not only for an individual but an entire population living within the same national borders.

Keckley’s extended investigation of this experience stands out as one of the few moments in the book where she takes an opportunity to deliver an overtly political commentary. She clarifies her point without victimizing little Lincoln:

Do not imagine that I desire to reflect upon the intellect of little Tad…I only mean to say that some incidents are about as damaging to one side as to the other. If a colored boy appears dull, so does a white boy sometimes; and if a whole race is judged by a single example of apparent dullness, another race should be judged by a similar example. (97)

Of course, she does openly state her opinion about Tad, while laughing up her sleeve. And she does, as I have discussed with relevant evidence, “reflect upon” and judge his intellectual abilities and his overindulgence. Building a sound argument through Tad, Keckley productively exploits this excellent opportunity. Through the book, she reinterprets and reintroduces her spontaneous expression of amusement and apology to present an affective commentary on racial biases.

Keckley’s Rooms

Ignored, unrecognized or acknowledged, Keckley’s body is always out in public – even when she is in her own rooms.70 In the narrative, one of the recurring spaces that is

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70 I borrow the phrase “out in public” from Alison Piepmeier. In her study of nineteenth-century women (including Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells) and their social presences and actions, Piepmeier concludes that “although often veiled with the costumes of domesticity, privacy, victimization, and proper femininity,
emphasized and redefined in its temporality is the rooms Keckley occupies. The book opens in a room that she claims as her own. While this room is a space where she is safe to reflect on the past and recall her personal history, it is also a place that physically distances her body from the rest of the world. Finding the “right room” is at times complicated for a black ex-slave body in post-war-nineteenth-century America.71

The rooms Keckley continuously travels within and out of are central to the discussions of spatiality in this chapter. An important tension that needs to be highlighted within these rooms is related to her precarious privacy. As the example below demonstrates, Elizabeth’s privacy is almost always public. The rooms that she claims to be her own do not grant her the private individuality of a door to lock from the inside – both during and after slavery. “One day when I was very busy, Mrs. McC. Drove up to my apartments, came in where I was engaged with my needle,” Keckley reports (35). Elizabeth, evidently, is expected to be at her place when her ladies need to locate her. Keckley explicitly states her disapproval of ladies coming to her place instead of sending their servants for her.72 Keckley’s hybrid place functions as both her office and domestic lodging. Presumably due to her hierarchically lower-class status, she is unable to draw strict boundaries to regulate casual foot traffic. But the book provides the opportunity to express her right and need to a protected personal space.

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71 Especially her experience at a New York restaurant, which I discuss later in this chapter, exemplifies this important detail about Keckley’s public-room access and permission.
72 It is relevant to note that nineteenth century was a time of the calling card etiquette among the white elites of Washington (Scofield). See Merry Ellen Scofield’s article for a detailed discussion of the tradition.
Even in her own rooms, who Keckley is and how she positions herself are determined by outside forces. Mrs. Lincoln, as a First Lady client, can come in without an invitation, for instance. The white dominant discourses and the ladies that embody such discourses penetrate the walls of Elizabeth’s rooms. The distinction between public and private becomes ambiguous. Owning rights to private lodging does not grant her the right to claim the rights to her privacy. Writing and publishing a book for an audience, however, she expresses her undisclosed reactions that subtly but clearly criticize her unexpected guests/clients for acting inconsiderate – perhaps despite their higher level of formal education and financial opportunity.

Mary Lincoln is one of those clients whose manners Keckley criticizes. In the narrative, Keckley disapprovingly reflects on Mrs. Lincoln’s visit to her place instead of calling Keckley to the White House:

Mrs. Lincoln came to my apartments one day towards the end of the summer of 1864…I never approved of ladies, attached to the Presidential household, coming to my rooms. I always thought that it would be more consistent with their dignity to send for me, and let me come to them, instead of their coming to me. (68, emphasis added)

Keckley, similar to Eliza Potter here, claims theoretical superiority in ladyhood. Although she is not a lady by arbitrary nineteenth-century social prerequisites and definitions of ladyhood, she calls her visitor ladies out on their misdemeanor. Her writing functions to challenge some rigid social roles if not reverse them.

While uninterrupted solitude is conditional and elusive for Keckley, the time she can have to reflect on her past brings together her body and mind productively. Sitting
“alone in [her] room,” connects her to events, people, and places of her personal history. The book is created through these reflective experiences in solitude. And this process allows her to give voice to her poignant silences. As she recalls in lingering emotional pain, her enslaved body goes through torture and abuse. She records an example of such inhumane treatments chattel slavery in the US overlooked or justified for long years. Keckley provides the reader a brief summary of what she endured. She briefly explains Mr. Burwell’s cruel treatment and her silent dignity against pain and helplessness in the moment. Her silent-in-the-moment body (in flesh and blood) regains the voice through the narrative. Describing the experience, Keckley writes: “I closed my lips firmly, that not even a groan might escape from them, and stood like a statue while the keen lash cut deep into my flesh” (14). Keckley describes the body as strong, resilient but also vulnerable in the face of unjust practices of racialized domination. During the lashing she describes with exceptional detail – compared to many other memories recorded in the book – the body is soundless and motionless. Immobility of her body in the hands of “[her] tormentor” is not a choice for Keckley but an act that demonstrates glimpses of pride and resistance: “it cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back. Oh God! I can feel the torture now…I did not scream; I was too proud to let my tormentor know what I was suffering” (14). The act of writing not only re-connects Keckley with her memories that are processed through the body, but it also means re-creating the body. That is, her body, once perceived and treated as merely an object, now has words to deliver, as a free business woman, to a wide American audience. Through the book, Keckley gives voice to the body

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73 Keckley introduces Mr. Burwell as “a hard, cruel man, the village schoolmaster…a member of my young master’s church and he was a frequent visitor to the personage” (13). There is no textual or biographical evidence to link her pregnancy to Mr. Burwell. Keckley does not reveal the name of her rapist who impregnated her.
that “stays like a statue” (14). She redefines her identity through her corporeality. Her words speak for every inch of her being “stunned with pain, bruised and bleeding” (14). Her pen screams when lips are shut firmly.

**Rooms with Locks**

In March 1867, Mary Lincoln invited Keckley to New York to accompany her during the scandalous sale attempt of her wardrobe. She asked Keckley to meet her in the city and assist her in “disposing a portion of [her] wardrobe,” as she wrote in her letter to Lizzie from Chicago (19). Keckley’s decision to help Mrs. Lincoln was evidently an obligatory choice: a binding paradox. She directly copies the letter from Mrs. Lincoln in the narrative. In response, Keckley explains her reasons behind joining her in New York. Contrary to assumptions about the relationship between the two, Keckley writes: “she was the wife of Abraham Lincoln, the man who had done so much for my race, and I could refuse to do nothing for her, calculated to advance her interests” (120). While Mary Lincoln considered Lizzie a friend, Keckley’s support for the former First Lady is primarily coming from her dedicated loyalty – not unconditional amiability. The unbalanced nature of this uncommon companionship is evident throughout the book. Not only are the two women incompatible – primarily in terms of race and class relations – regardless of one’s political affiliations as the First Lady, but also because their one-sided friendship is built on hierarchically uneven foundations.

Keckley’s sense of obligation in assisting Mrs. Lincoln in New York is not due to their strong friendship – at least from Keckley’s point of view. Instead, Keckley’s

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74 Mrs. Lincoln calls Elizabeth Keckley, *Lizzie*. She also begins all of the letters written to Keckley (and included in the appendix of the original edition of the book) with “My Dear Lizzie” – except for one that opens with “My Dear Keckley” as the greeting (154).
obligation to Mrs. Lincoln is rooted in her homage to Abraham Lincoln. Keckley’s involvement in the New York trip with President Lincoln’s widow was a duty of a loyal servant. According to Fleischner, “[Mary Lincoln] has never forgotten how Lizzy had taken care of her [after the assassination of her husband]; since then, no one really listened to her anymore” (304). In addition to these reasons, Fleischner rightfully points out that “in making the entrepreneurial African American Elizabeth Keckley her partner, Mary was choosing her one female friend who could range beyond the genteel limitations that society imposed on white women like herself” (273). Mrs. Lincoln might have had a calculated strategy in deciding to travel incognito with her African American partner. Yet, she could not predict difficulties Lizzie would encounter as a black woman in the city.

Jean Harvey Baker aptly notes: “both women had underestimated the severity of New York’s color bar” (273). The undesirable obstacles that prevent Keckley from accessing food in the city exemplifies uncalculated consequences of existing prejudices against black bodies at the time. Keckley is told that she is “in the wrong room” by a restaurant employee (124). Following these directions of spatial exclusion, Keckley is ushered out of a New York dining hall. Her black, hungry, working-class, female body after a long trip is denied food service regardless of her financial status that could afford the cost.

After a long trip, Keckley arrives at the location “St. Denis Hotel” in Broadway to meet Mrs. Clarke (Mrs. Lincoln incognito). She is admittedly tired and hungry. Evaluating the situation after the initial greeting, Mrs. Lincoln tells Keckley to go eat dinner “right away” (124). With good intentions wrapped in oblivion and naiveté, “she pulled the rope, and a servant appearing she ordered him to give me dinner” (124). Yet, in the 1860s New
York, eating at a restaurant by herself was evidently a challenging attempt for Keckley. Mrs. Lincoln mistakenly assumed that it would be as natural of an experience for Keckley as it is for her to be seated and served at a public place. Unable to order food in the first dining hall, where she was briefly seated “at a table in one corner of the room,” she was ordered “outside of the door” (124). Reflecting on her growing discontent, Keckley writes: “Hungry and humiliated as I was, I was willing to follow to any place to get my dinner” (124). Keckley expresses genuine emotions through this acerbic statement. As she is transferred from one area to another, her increasing hunger naturally reduces her physical and mental strength. Her desperation in an unfamiliar environment dominated by openly discriminatory people and practices is uncensored. Evidently, her narration does not employ humor here. Her writing of the painful experience her body suffers through is unambiguous and raw. The universal physical sensation of hunger knows no race or class differences. Keckley’s transparent vulnerability appears as one of the most easy-to-identify-with moments in the narrative for her predominantly white audience.

Keckley’s biological body cannot be divorced from environmental circumstances. (In)accessibility of dining rooms underline racialized structures remaining in post-war America. Predictably, the last place she is taken to that same night denies her food service, explaining “it is after the regular hour for dinner. The room is locked up” (125). This scene is an unmistakable demonstration of racialized segregation. Keckley is physically excluded from social spaces, which directly impacts her bodily sensations and emotional wellbeing immediately and simultaneously. Keckley’s reflection on this experience demonstrates her physical (hunger) and emotional (frustration) discomfort and her racialist disadvantages.
Keckley’s expressed frustration does not override her admirable stamina. She is vulnerable and unable to improve her circumstances independently. Yet, through the narrative she presents her strong character, especially in comparison to Mrs. Lincoln. Mrs. Lincoln, despite her race and class authority, fails to intervene and help her friend Lizzie to eat food that night. Even though she attempts to go out to find her a meal, Keckley criticizes this suggestion as “impulsive”: “Her impulsiveness alarmed me,” Keckley writes (125). She warns her lady against such action, reminding that “you are here as Mrs. Clarke and not as Mrs. Lincoln…No, Mrs. Lincoln, I shall not go outside of the hotel tonight for I realize your situation, if you don’t” (125-126). Keckley prioritizes her lady over her physical needs for fundamental human function. But, more importantly, she demonstrates her wisdom in evident superiority to Mrs. Lincoln.

Convincing Mrs. Lincoln that leaving the room that night would not be a safe idea, Keckley endures “humiliation,” in her own words, and the sensations of her malnourished body. Here, I am primarily referring to the underfed body of Keckley in blood and flesh. Yet, it would be productive to extend this claim metaphorically to understand her emotional “malnourishment” as well. Keckley writes: “It was with difficulty I could convince her that she should act with caution. She was frank and impulsive that she never thought her actions might be misconstrued. It did not occur to her that she might order dinner to be served in my room, so I went to bed without a mouthful to eat” (Keckly 126). Keckley presents herself as the voice of reason between the two. Even though there is clear anger expressed through writing in retrospect, she does not take impulsive action in the moment. She calms Mrs. Lincoln down while she is the one in need of immediate care. This reversal of roles asserts Keckley’s superiority. She assumes a parental role in control over the situation and
the impulsive Mary. While she can convince her to stay in for safety and privacy concerns, she is unable (or unwilling) to tell Mrs. Lincoln that she herself is starved and that ordering room service is an option she would like. Instead, she goes to bed hungry, blaming it openly on her “impulsive” and inconsiderate partner. Her proven wisdom and stamina create the literary opportunity she is able to exploit through the narrative. Paradoxically, it is due to and because of her acquiesced body the book now demonstrates this moment as an empowering self-assertion for the autobiographer.

Keckley dedicates a generous section in the book to their unsuccessful sales trip to New York. The trip includes disappointments and frustrations of both women, respectively. As the narrative reveals, Mrs. Lincoln is exposed, and she fails to raise as much money as she hoped in the end. Before she leaves New York, she volunteers Keckley to “look after her interests” (144). Keckley’s commitment to this mission and her lady, and her already abandoned business in Washington prepared largely unfavorable circumstances for Keckley. She notes in the narrative: “Mrs. Lincoln’s venture proved so disastrous that she was unable to reward me for my services. My New York expedition has made me richer in experience but poorer in purse” (144).

Keckley’s narrative ends where it begins: in her room. What she claims as her room does not reflect property ownership or permanent residence, however. The room she occupies in New York proves to be temporary lodging, a space she also utilizes for professional purposes. Her relatively mobile business requires a space she can use for her sewing equipment, materials and laboring. Being forced to stay in New York to pursue Mary Lincoln’s business relations, Keckley is unable to establish stability with her career and clientele. Having physically parted ways with Mrs. Lincoln, Keckley writes her
narrative in this boarding-house room. Depicting a picture of financial hardships she has faced, she concludes:

If poverty did not weigh me down as it does, I would not now be toiling by day with my needle, and writing by night in the plain little room on the fourth floor of Carroll Place. And yet I have learned to love the garret-like room…In memory I have traveled through the shadows and the sunshine of the past, and the bare walls associated with the visions that have come to me from the long ago. (146)

Biographical evidence indicates that Keckley, following her long engagement with Mrs. Lincoln and her secret affairs, struggled financially and professionally. Fleischner notes that “her Washington business had been virtually shut down and her need for money by the end of the year was great. Mary had promised her a commission on donations she helped raise, but she ‘raised nothing and received nothing’” (314).

**Behind the Scenes in Print**

*History has been kind to Mary Lincoln, but it has neglected Elizabeth Keckly altogether. Mary is remembered chiefly as a difficult wife, a heartbroken mother, a manic shopper, and a lunatic. Lizzy is barely mentioned; indeed, her entire existence has been disputed.*

Jennifer Fleischner

*Behind the Scenes*, Keckley’s singular published work, was not welcomed by many of its readers. As, Xiomara Santamarina, rightfully argues, *Behind the Scenes* “continues to be contested and easily misinterpreted today” (144). The book was evidently controversial due to its focus on the former First Lady’s intimate life details made public

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75 As Jennifer Fleischner notes, “Lizzy remained the entire fall and winter in New York, where she lived in the houses of various friends and supported herself by sewing” (312).
without her known consent. When first published in 1868, the book proved to be a miscalculated social investment for Keckley (as many critics argue). Her racially marginalized body was indirectly pinned on the figurative public wall of shame permanently – through newspaper reviews that helped create and circulate negative reception of the book. Keckley’s intentions behind writing the narrative and what the book offers to its readers – then and now – have largely been misunderstood.

Writing and publishing her autobiographical narrative was not an effective strategy for belonging with the higher-class white clients/friends for Keckley. As Santamarina rightfully underlines, “critics then and now have been unable to pinpoint why Keckley entirely failed to predict the outcome of her book…the disparity between Keckley’s solicitous and defensive representation of herself and the outrage she provoked remains largely unexplained” (142).

Contemporaneous reviews of the first edition of *Behind the Scenes* were largely denouncing and accusatory, directed at the book and its controversial author. For instance, *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, skeptical of Keckley’s authentic authorship, denounced *Behind the Scenes* as a “disgraceful volume” (“Behind the Scenes”). Following the same line of commentary, *The Evening Star* of D.C. questioned Keckley’s credentials.

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76 I discuss reception of the book in more detail later in this chapter.

77 Santamarina focuses on Keckley’s labor and how for the entrepreneurial woman, “friends and clients are one and the same” (150). Correspondingly, “Keckley is able to renounce her slave status while capitalizing on…the social ‘credit history’ she has complied as a slave. Keckley thus concludes in the first half of her narrative with a story of freedom” (Santamarina 151).

78 In addition to ones I discuss in this section, there were other newspaper commentaries that were brutally racist. Such reviews judged Keckley’s character purely based on her racial heritage, an arbitrarily hierarchical scale. For example, on April 28, 1868, *The Tarboro Southerner* reported: “The Mrs. Keckley mentioned, is a negro [sic], and everybody knows how ‘newsy’ negro women can be when you give the chance [sic]” (*TTS*). While I choose not to include this article in the main body of my research, it is still important to know and understand the sociopolitical environment Keckley was living, working, writing, and publishing in. In post-war America, structures that created and facilitated institutional slavery remained painfully present – in visible and tangible ways.
as an ex-slave “and since rebellion, and up to date, Mrs. Abraham Lincoln’s modiste (dressmaker), confidential friend and business woman generally” (“Back Door Literature”). This review attributes Keckley many titles including “business woman.” Yet, it does not find her historically evident background to be enough for authorship: “precisely how these occupations fit one for writing a book proper to be added to a library we are not able to perceive” (“Back Door Literature”). At the national level, the New York Times review of April 19, 1868 described Behind the Scenes as “mere gossip…mainly a failure” (“New Publications”). The commentary openly revealed the disgust of the editors. They reported: “We cannot but look upon many of the disclosures made in this volume as gross violations of confidence” (“New Publications”). Keckley was declared as the author of a shameful publication that ultimately made her a traitor in the eyes of the American public. To be sure, her authorship was still under scrutiny. Regardless, however, New York Times, among many other newspapers, conclusively categorized the book as a vulgar attack on woman’s privacy, friendship, and secrecy of the White House.

It is true that the book did not help Keckley personally or professionally. In fact, she lost her clientele and eventually closed her business. I am not interested in understanding Keckley’s so-called mistakes in her decision to write the book. Because, regardless of her true motives or naïveté, the book is an authentic extension of Keckley, the historical person. That is, the book has shaped the public narrative of Keckley. When it was first published, people developed their opinions about her through her words in print. And today, scholarship continues to analyze who and where Keckley’s narrator is to shape ideas about the woman who lived in the nineteenth century. This ongoing complex narrative cannot be artificially separated from Elizabeth Keckley, born a slave in Virginia.
in 1818. Here, she created and re-created a version of Elizabeth Keckley and everyone in her circles she considered worth mentioning – Mary Todd Lincoln, centrally.

One of the most controversial aspects of the book, especially when it was first published, was Mary Lincoln’s unedited letters inserted as a generous appendix section. According to some sources, Keckley did not play a decision-making role in this sales strategy. In fact, Keckley explained having “been betrayed by Redpath [the editor] who persuaded her to ‘lend’ him the letters promising not to publish or print anything personal from them” (Fleischner 318). Regardless, however, the book’s published entirety, with Keckley’s name printed on the cover, affects reception of both the author and her literary creation. Content details and genre elements of these twenty-four letters are rarely discussed by scholars. Yet, these letters are important to analyze as an appendix of a book expands both the total number of physical pages printed but also provides supplementary materials akin to the rest of the narrative.

The *Behind the Scenes* appendix consists exclusively of the presumably unaltered letters in Keckley’s possession. The act of exhibiting these letters, written for intimate correspondence between two individuals, publicly violates their privacy without the correspondents’ consent. As Rudiger Nutt-Kofolth explains, “these kinds of texts and documents [letters and diaries] that are not meant to be published and thus not intended to be transcribed into a printed text…But when letters and diaries are edited, they are inevitably diverted of their private character and transcribed into a public form” (55-56). Together with other personal details included in the rest of the book, the work as a whole (written, printed, and assembled) breaches the (largely arbitrary) gap between public and private.
While Keckley’s right to personal privacy and authority might have been violated (if, as I mentioned, Redpath published the appendix without her knowledge or consent), her elusive presence in the appendix remains consistent with the main chapters of the book. More specifically, there is only one letter written by Keckley in this section. And, perhaps surprisingly, this letter is not addressed to Mary Lincoln but to Bishop Payne.\footnote{In his corresponding explanatory note, William Andrews introduces Daniel Alexander Payne as a “minister, civic leader, bishop of the African American Methodist Episcopal Church, and president of Wilberforce University from 1863 to 1876” (168n70).} The imbalance in this section is not only based in numbers of letters authored by each woman, but also in the information they provide that demonstrate distinctions between their moral characters in their own words. While Mary Lincoln’s letters to Keckley include continuous attempts to remotely orchestrate her disappointing sales in New York, Keckley’s single letter to the Bishop is a donation offer for the Wilberforce University, “where [her] son was educated, and whose life was sacrificed for liberty” (162). Keckley’s letter demonstrates her generosity in this brief message. She specifies the items she wishes to be considered for donation:

    The sacred relics were presented to me by Mrs. Lincoln, after the assassination of our beloved President…the identical cloak and bonnet worn by Mrs. Lincoln on that eventful night. On the cloak can be seen the life-blood of Abraham Lincoln. This cloak could not be purchased from me, though many have been the offers for it. I deemed it too sacred to sell, but donate it for the cause of educating the four millions of slaves liberated by our president. (162, emphasis in the original)

Keckley’s words here – especially when juxtaposed against Mary Lincoln’s letters in the same appendix – highlight her humble character. While Mrs. Lincoln, in her very last letter
that concludes the book, expresses her disappointment with the amount she received for her valuable items, Keckley appears to value non-profit generosity over monetary wealth. Mary Lincoln closes the aforementioned letter with the following lines: “the goods sold have amounted to $824, and they appropriate all this for their expenses…My diamond ring itself cost more than that sum, and I charged them not to sell it under $700. [To Keckley] Do get my things safely returned to me” (164). Mary Lincoln is clearly discontent with the amount raised through her sales. Unlike Keckley, she does not consider an alternative philanthropic route for the remaining items. To be sure, Keckley was not in a better financial position than Mary Lincoln. In fact, her business had already slowed down due to her involvement with Mary Lincoln’s business relations in New York. Regardless, however, she declined any financial compensation for the memorabilia with high sentimental (and implied monetary) value.80

Just as in the rest of the narrative, Keckley’s presence is elusive but impactful in the appendix. Not including her responses to Mary Lincoln with her letters, Keckley protects her right to silence in her own book-space. Remaining secondary in the background, once again, Keckley strengthens her becoming primary through this space. With this evidently powerful becoming, Keckley’s interpersonal connection with the former First Lady is undeniably at stake.

Conclusion

80 According to Fleischner’s biographical research, Keckley did end up selling some items in her possession for profit in later years: “[Keckley] had continued sewing, although after her book was published, some of her white customers quietly disappeared…In 1889, needing money, the stately, seventy-two-year-old Mrs. Keckley took the Lincoln mementoes she had for thirty-five years…and sold them” (Fleischner 323).
Following the first chapter on Eliza Potter, another divergent black woman of the nineteenth century, in this chapter I have demonstrated the limitations of rigid racialized interpretations of American women’s multitudinous literary expressions. *Behind the Scenes* (both when it was first published in 1868 and now) stands out as a book that has challenged received categories of race and literary genre. It productively disagrees with conclusive misconceptions regarding black women’s autobiography, as scholars such as Joanne M. Braxton argue.\(^{81}\) Similarly, the categorical classification of *Behind the Scenes* has been one of the most important scholarly debates in the book’s literary history. Dominant structures that define, distribute, and perpetuate meanings of black womanhood in America continue to impact Keckley’s book-space.

Through the complex spatiality of *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley remains largely hidden behind the scenes of her own narrative. Her freedom, as this chapter demonstrates, oscillates between boundaries of bondage and freedom both material and intangible. The precarious freedom enacted by the life narrative strongly parallels complexities of her lived experiences. Through her only published work (even though it faced strong oppositions when first published) Keckley participated in and contributed to American literary traditions – against the odds. With the book in print, this participation has outlived her corporeality in blood and flesh. In addition to its re-discovery and circulation since the second half of the twentieth century, the book has served as a key archival source for Lincoln scholars.\(^{82}\) This contribution is highly significant especially considering her

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\(^{81}\) According to Braxton, black woman’s autobiography rests in “the tradition…of the commonality of black women’s experiences…because of the uniquely Afra-American culture and consciousness that emerge from this experience. After all, autobiography, perhaps more than any other literary genre, is a form of symbolic memory, a confluence of culture and consciousness” (208).

\(^{82}\) For instance, in *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*, Jean H. Baker reads *Behind the Scenes* largely as a Mrs. Lincoln biography and builds a significant portion of her research on details provided by Elizabeth Keckley.
outsider position reporting from the inside. As such, Keckley, the former-slave, White-House seamstress, continues to have an impact on the former First Lady Mary Lincoln’s national narrative – therefore her public image – through her narrative.

With the book, Keckley continues to precariously belong in spaces and conversations she was physically excluded from (or conditionally occupied) during her lifetime. Keckley and her *Behind the Scenes* have gained increasing academic interest in the last couple of decades. Today, the publication that brought her social and financial difficulties towards the end of her lifetime brings her voice back in critical discussions and questions with immediate consequences for her fellow Americans. Especially with limited biographical evidence outside her own writing, the book in its material existence continues to be the source readers rely on to develop deeper understandings about Keckley. Chapters expanded, rooms avoided, and words uttered or silenced in the narrative remain inextricable with Keckley’s belonging – then and now.
CHAPTER FOUR

“AT HOME IN AN ALIEN WORLD”: MARY ANTIN’S PROMISED LAND

Where had been my very country until now? What flag had I loved? What heroes had I worshiped? The very names of these things had been unknown to me. Well I knew that Polotzk was not my country. It was goluth – exile.

Mary Antin

To say we are all exiles, is to conceal the difference it makes when one is forced to cross borders, or when one cannot return home.

Sara Ahmed

Introduction: Where Antin Belongs

In previous chapters, I explored two unconventional autobiographers, Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckley, with the central goal to provide a broader understanding of marginalized and disadvantaged women’s multiple degrees of belonging despite spatial exclusions. Although these two chapters follow a linear chronology, I am not presenting a historical argument. As this dissertation is rooted in a desire to understand the dynamic relationship between material spaces, social concepts, and the affective body, the emphasis is not on a time period but on patterns of spatial structures and strategies.\(^{83}\) In this chapter, I move forward forty-four years to examine early 20\(^{th}\)-century author Mary Antin through her most recognized autobiographical narrative, *The Promised Land* (1912).\(^{84}\) Just as in

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\(^{83}\) I find Lisa Blackman’s definition of the term “affective body” to be useful for my research. According to Blackman, the affective body is not fixed and limited with the blood and flesh: “The affective body is considered permeable to the ‘outside’ so that the very distinction between the inside and the outside as fixed and absolute is put into question...Bodies are processed that are articulated and articulate through their connections with others, human and non-human” (10,133). Blackman further discusses the body and provides a detailed genealogy of the body as a critical inquiry across the humanities in her most recent study, *Immaterial Bodies* (2012). Unless otherwise indicated, I refer to the affective body of Antin when I write “her body” in the following pages.

\(^{84}\) Although I argue for the book to be an important part of Antin’s belonging in following sections of this chapter, I adopt two different grammatical tenses to distinguish between literary and historical analyses (and to achieve conceptual clarity): I use past tense for the historical person, Mary Antin, and present tense for her literary expressions.
the first two chapters, movements of the marginalized female body remain at the center of this chapter’s argument. Reading these three autobiographers – Potter, Keckley, and Antin – together demonstrates ways in which spatial patterns related to legalized slavery and racialized practices resurface through disadvantaged American women’s literary imagination.

Just like Potter and Keckley, Antin defines her writing motivation as largely external. That is, according to the narrative, friends and family expect her to document her life story. Following her exceptionally successful self-life narrative, which provides a detailed outline of her journey from Russia to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, Antin received several questions regarding the process. In response, she published a short piece titled “How I Wrote The Promised Land” in an attempt to satisfy the curious reader. In this article, Antin explains, “How did you come to write your book? is a leading question...From the time I was a school girl in Boston till the day I began my autobiography somebody was urging me to write the story of my life” (392). Antin presents outside influences as an important reason or motivator behind the published work. Her words in the quote above echo, respectively, Keckley’s opening statement: “I have often been asked to write my life, as those who know me know that it has been an eventful one” (3).

In The Promised Land, Antin travels across multiple boundaries – including national, linguistic, and racial. Her spatial strategies are not restricted by her skin color, as in previous chapters, but by her immigration status and her linguistic accent. Similar to Keckley and Potter, on the other hand, Antin uses her writing both to disguise (acquiesce) and claim (resist) her relational and fluid identity. While Antin’s experiences and material
limitations do not compare to the other two marginalized bodies’ in racial or legal terms, her degrees and strategies of belonging as an outsider/insider establish strong parallelisms. As I argued in the first chapter, reading belonging for Potter’s racialized mobile body in antebellum America demands a complex understanding of the mobility/stability paradox. Keckley’s belonging, explored in the second chapter, is intertwined with the spatiality of the book. Following Potter and Keckley, this chapter explores the circulation of Antin’s published work in direct relation to the corporeal body. Antin’s The Promised Land, five decades after The Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life, offers new productive and provocative ways of reading a marginalized female body’s spatiality.

Situating the Argument

My argument in this chapter is twofold. The Promised Land and Antin’s movements, registered through the body, demand an analysis that moves beyond limitations of dominant discourses rooted in immigrant assimilation. Building on this foundation, I study the concept of belonging as a productive alternative to ultimately argue that Antin’s belonging, active and not fixed, is a complex course of ever-becoming that is directly tied to the circulation of her book, The Promised Land. Her narrative and this chapter make it clear: Antin belongs in America as America belongs to Antin.

Exploring Antin’s belonging matters because, unlike assimilation, it allows a complex understanding of her body’s precarious relationship to America. It is inextricable with the affective body and its “connections with others” (Blackman 133). The term, as I employ it throughout the dissertation, draws attention to a multifaceted process: ongoing

85 Interactions of the body are “organic and inorganic, living and non-living, material and immaterial” (Blackman 13-14). For the “affective body” definition of Blackman, see earlier footnote.
and ever-present. Inherently about the spatiality of the marginalized immigrant body, belonging negotiates material, embodied and imagined boundaries. Antin’s belonging is an everchanging process of interactions that determine lines of exclusion and inclusion.86

Reading Antin’s belonging through The Promised Land builds on the dominant perception of her as a non-member to the dominant American culture. As Antin writes, this nation’s borders are guarded from within by “you born Americans” who remain skeptical towards “foreigners” like Antin herself, even if they are “made into good Americans” (Antin 175).87

Her determined claim of, what I will call, immigrant citizenship is in direct correspondence with such arbitrarily exclusive understanding of American nationhood.88 Belonging of an immigrant citizen is about movement (across tangible and intangible boundaries) and stability (legally documented permanent residency). The term also places emphasis on the fragility of an outsider’s rights to a national identity while they are inside.

Antin’s belonging is not an opposition to her body’s exclusion from spaces (local or national), but it exists due to and despite her nonbelonging within various boundaries. She negotiates such lines of exclusion in The Promised Land – including enforced boundaries around Polotzk, Russia, intangible socio-economic ones that envelop Boston

86 Here I am unpacking a definition of “ecology.” One of the meanings of the word, “in extended use” is the “interrelationship between any system and its environment; the product of this” (“Ecology, n.”). Following Sara Ahmed’s sophisticated study on the “relationship between strangers, embodiment, and community,” I read Antin’s belonging as a process of “encounter” that “suggests…a meeting which involves surprise and conflict” (6). Such understanding of encounter builds on the premise that “identity itself [is] instituted through encounters with others that surprise, that shift the boundaries of the familiar…in daily meetings with others, subjects are perpetually reconstituted” (7).

87 I refer to the 1997 Penguin edition of Antin’s The Promised Land here and in the following pages of this chapter.

88 Although I am not primarily interested in investigating multiculturalism, Sara Ahmed’s thoughts on the concept in relation to national belonging provides a multidimensional understanding of Antin. According to Ahmed, “[t]hinking about multiculturalism must begin…with an understanding that the coherence of the ‘we’ of the nation is always imaginary and that, given this, such a ‘we’ does not abolish cultural difference, but emerges through it” (101).
slums, and linguistic boundaries of English as a foreign language.\textsuperscript{89} She belongs in America as a citizen through immigration. Her book, in English, is a product of her memories and aspirations that travel across continents. Exploring Antin through this critical lens shows that her belonging in a national place with its people involves more than borders protected by the government and legal citizenship documents. \textit{The Promised Land} continues the ever-becoming construction of an American citizen, Mary Antin, who belongs on American soil with her fellow Americans.

Her belonging in America with her fellow Americans should be conceptualized in direct relation to her published and circulated work. \textit{The Promised Land} was indisputably an unprecedented success for a Jewish immigrant: the book “brought her nationwide fame, selling nearly 85,000 copies before her death” (Nadell).\textsuperscript{90} Correspondingly, as Werner Sollors underlines in his introduction to the 1997 Penguin edition of the book, “Antin’s autobiography was exceptional among Jewish immigrant writing in the United States by becoming a big popular success” (xxix). The book received largely positive reviews and it reached various reader groups through bookstores, libraries, and classrooms: “\textit{The Promised Land} was also published in special education editions with teacher’s manuals and student questions, and it was used as a public school civics class text” (Sollors xxx). The book earned Antin great popularity during her lifetime. It occupied (and still does) public space and negotiated her belonging as Mary Antin, an accomplished Russian immigrant (as written in the dust jacket of the first edition of the book), but, more

\textsuperscript{89} In my research, I found two different spellings of Antin’s hometown: Polotzk and Polotsk. Following Antin’s version, I will continue using Polotzk in my chapter.

\textsuperscript{90} Parts of \textit{The Promised Land} first appeared in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} as “a series of five installments” (Sollors xxiv).
importantly for Antin, a fellow American citizen. The Promised Land, with her name, Mary Antin, written on the cover, earned its place in the library of former President and fellow American citizen, Theodore Roosevelt. In a thank-you letter addressed to Antin in 1914, Roosevelt wrote: “[the book] will occupy, as long as I live, one of the most honored places in my library” (qtd. in Salz 152). Her book, Roosevelt reassures her, belongs in his library – presumably and unconventionally, among some of the key literary figures of the American canon.

Physical copies in circulation (first and later editions) carve out a place in American public space. With The Promised Land, Antin’s name reached readers beyond the Boston area. As Sollors notes, “[m]any newspapers and periodicals from the Kansas City Star to the London Daily Express, and from Hearst’s Magazine to the French L’Echo Sioniste printed long excerpts from The Promised Land... With the success of the autobiography, Antin’s career seemed made” (xxxi). The book extends the autobiographer’s re-constructed (remembered, written, revised, and edited) life experiences to the audience that encounters Antin through the text. While this complex processing of memories for a literary audience could arguably be considered a global approach in autobiographical studies, Antin’s marginalized position as an outsider (immigrant) and insider (citizen) earns The Promised Land an unprecedented place in American literary history. American readers’ encounter with Antin, as an American autobiographer, through the book’s circulation, suggests ways of belonging where she is assumed not to. Although legally a citizen, she will always remain a Russian-Jewish immigrant writer in America. The strategies of belonging enacted

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91 When published in 1912, “the dust jacket carried the subtitle ‘The Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant’” (Sollors xxiv).
92 Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter’s argument, I am also interested in an expanded argument to include digital distribution of the book, including e-text and audio formats, for contemporary readers.
by the book, therefore, will continue to embody elements of inclusion and exclusion simultaneously.

As such, Antin is an immigrant citizen, a non-native speaker who finally learns “at least to think in English without an accent” (282). Her work, an extension of her existence, embodies traces of “all the processes of uprooting, transporting, replanting, acclimatization, and development [that] took place in [her] soul” (3). Correspondingly, she considers herself a changed (almost a different) person. In one of the most quoted passages in the book, Antin writes: “I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over…she and not I, is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began” (1, emphasis in the original). While in this opening statement Antin intentionally separates the narrated “I” from the historical person, she does not erase her Russian-Jewish history in the book. In fact, the narrative is almost perfectly divided in half: eight out of the twenty chapters discuss the family’s Jewish life in Russia in detail. And, as Werner Sollors rightfully states, “some of Antin’s best writing is set in Polotzk rather than in the United States” (xv). The book does not seamlessly blend her past and present, Russian and American life together. It embodies “a long past [captured in text at the age of thirty] vividly remembered” with “the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it” (53).

Through her writing, Antin brings attention to what it means to claim American citizenship (beyond legal documentation) and identity at the turn of the century, when the country opened its doors to immigrants – especially from eastern Europe – to meet growing labor demands of American industries. In The Promised Land, Mary Antin tells a transatlantic story that brings the Antin family from Polotzk, Russia to Boston in the 1890s. Maryashe (Mary’s full Hebrew name) immigrated to the United States in 1891 with her
mother and siblings to meet their father who initially left Russia to start a new life on American soil. This was also a transformative period in the history of Russian Jews:

following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881…[a] harsh new era began that included, for the first time, government-sponsored physical violence – pogroms – and blood libels targeting Jews and their property…Between 1881 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, nearly 2,000,000 freely abandoned their homes to seek new lives in other European countries, Palestine, and – most of all – America. 

(Finkelstein 88)

Amidst such global tension, migrating bodies, and changing landscapes, Antin’s exceptional public success as a writer, her admiration of American culture and history, and her demonstrated advocacy for Americanization and arguably hiding her heritage (in plain sight) attracted scholars’ curiosity since the release of The Promised Land. Researchers have often interpreted Antin’s engagement with America as a strong example of immigrant assimilation. Werner Sollors, for instance, concludes that it was assimilation, full American identity, even if adopted unilaterally by declaration of will rather than by birth or easy acceptance from old-stock Americans, that entitled Antin to criticize her adopted ‘promised land’ – or to praise

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93 According to the USCIS 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, between the years 1891 and 1920, Russia was one of the first five countries of immigrant origin in the United States.

94 Her Americaness received mixed contemporaneous responses. While scholars such as Horace Kellen disapprovingly criticized her Americanization, others celebrated her as a fellow model immigrant-citizen. Kellen describes Antin as “‘assimilated’ even in religion, and more excessively, self-consciously flatteringly American than the Americans” (Kellen 86). On the other hand, Antin also received genuine flattery from others. She earned herself a chapter titled “The Making of a Patriot” in Mary Rosetta Parkman’s 1918 publication, Heroines of Service. In that chapter, Parkman honors Antin’s long journey from Russia to the United States and her devotion to her adopted country. Antin, in this portrayal appears as a model immigrant-citizen.
it for something that it would first have to become by fully including people like her. (xxxvi-xxxvii)

Although assimilation here is described as advantageous for Antin’s circumstances, it appears limiting. Assimilation denotes “becoming like” or “conformity” (“Assimilation, n”). To assimilate, correspondingly means “to absorb and incorporate” (“Assimilate, v”). This term inherently implies a passive subject-position of the immigrant body – individually and collectively. Antin’s immigrant body, within this discourse, is (unintentionally) victimized. Moreover, she is simultaneously (and indirectly) held responsible for her own victimization. I argue that The Promised Land and Antin’s bodily movements through the American landscape at the turn of the century demand an analysis of Antin’s belonging in America in order to move beyond limitations of the immigrant assimilation rubric in America.

Antin demonstrates awareness of the assimilationist criteria observed by her audience and critics. In determination, she writes: “I think I have thoroughly assimilated my past – I have done its bidding – I want now of to-day [sic]” (3, emphasis added). Antin’s “assimilation,” as this quote emphasizes, is not a passive submission to the dominant culture or an external force to resist. Rather, it is a word she consciously uses to describe her (ongoing) relationship with her past. For Antin, assimilation does not simply mean being incorporated into a new culture, stripped of her heritage and experiences. Instead, the word, as she uncommonly manipulates it, means mental absorption of her own history.

Studies rooted in Antin’s assimilation tend to ignore multifaceted significance of her belonging. This key term in this chapter allows me to productively disengage Antin from limiting discourses of assimilation. Magdalena J. Zaborowska touches on popular
readings of Antin in relation to her successful assimilation. She underlines how “[Antin] is still regarded as a ‘model of successful assimilation’” (58). However, what she identifies as unexplored in existing scholarship still functions within the same limiting discourse. According to Zaborowska, studies “often omit what an emphasis on her successful assimilation in such a transition entails: the pain of separation from the faith and the dream of being among the chosen people” (58). Even when research such as Zaborowska’s inquires into how Antin made the transition and successfully assimilated into American culture, results inevitably guide the reader to a fixed, stable end-point that assumes Antin to be a finished product.

A Stranger at Home: Maryashe Antin in Polotzk

“When I was a little girl, the world was divided into two parts; namely Polotzk, the place where I lived, and a strange land called Russia” (5). Mary Antin opens the first chapter of The Promised Land with this statement that recognizes her childhood as defined by boundaries that embody elements of belonging and being out of place simultaneously. Antin’s autobiographical birth-place scene depicts a world of divisions that hierarchically positioned Russian Gentiles over the Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century. Antin’s childhood years taught her unfavorable consequences of being Jewish in her homeland. Not knowing a better alternative, her young mind discovered religious discrimination and segregation in a divided world of Russian Jews and Gentiles (8). Her meditations on belonging began when she was feeling deeply like an exile within her home country. Her (non)belonging in Russia is directly related to the body and self-awareness of the body as unworthy in comparison to the Gentiles – as I discuss further in this chapter. The Antins’s financial resources (material) were limited in Polotzk. This fact, combined
with the physical insecurity of domestic settlement and the uncertainty of the family’s future, made Antin question the sense and concept of belonging fundamentally. Her estrangement in a familiar place largely dominates the first half of the narrative. Psychologically overwhelming details related to her life in Russia affect Antin’s writing. Following Ahmed’s discussion, I read Antin’s growing sense of “strangeness” in her homeland, “in [her] very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place” (Ahmed 21). In Russia, Antin was a stranger at home; in America, she is “at home in an alien world” (230).95

95 Not only does the narrative enact Antin’s world of divisions between two lands, but it also presents a distinctive separation of time. As Sollors underlines in his introduction to the 1997 Penguin edition of The Figure 8. “The Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire.” From: http://www.berdichev.org/mappaleofsettlement.htm

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Historical records show that Polotzk was part of the Pale Settlement in Russia (Figure 8). This part of the geography was in segregation with a movable boundary that was first established in 1791 by Catherine the Great (1762-1796) as a result of the partition of Poland. Over time…Russia not only expanded its territory westward, but also inherited over 1,000,000 unwanted Jewish inhabitants of the region. Catherine and their successors decided to solve their ‘Jewish problem’ by restricting Jews to the Pale of Settlement. (Filkenstein 86)

The Pale of Settlement became a place of exile for the Jews who were moved out of major urban areas such as Kiev and Moscow. Over a century, anti-Jewish practices and laws increased Russian oppression of Jews. By 1882 (a year after the assassination of Czar Alexander II and a decade before the Antins’ emigration), Jews were largely restricted within the Pale (with May Laws of 1882).96 New settlement and property laws coupled with employment and educational restrictions in addition to Christian obligations for Jewish businesses (such as holiday observations) negatively impacted every aspect of Jewish life in Russia.97

Russian Czar Alexander III strengthened anti-Jewish laws and regulations across the country, inheriting the throne from Alexander II (who was assassinated in 1881). “The czar’s ultimate goal…was to force one-third of Russian Jews to emigrate, one-third to

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*Promised Land,* “the book’s sense of space is related to its sense of time: Polotzk is Antin’s past, hence the past, the ‘Middle Ages,’ as opposed to America’s modernism…[The] immigrant Antin links two worlds; as heir of the ages, she spans centuries – creating the effect of a modern epic self that is larger than life” (Sollors xxvii-xxviii).

96 See Filkenstein for details of the Russian May Laws of 1882.

97 As Filkenstein explains, “[t]hey were no longer permitted to hold governmental jobs and low quotas were set for Jewish enrollment in high schools and universities. Jews were…ordered out of large cities such as Moscow, Kiew and Saint Petersburg…to be resettled in already crowded towns within the loosely defined borders of the Pale” (88). See Filkenstein’s detailed discussion of the Great Wave between 1881 and 1913 in *American Jewish History.*
convert, and one-third to starve” (Filkenstein 88). The Antins were not the only Jewish family affected by discriminatory acts and practices that penalized peoples of the Jewish faith. As Hasia R. Diner discusses,

[I]t was not just that they could not make a living. Relations between the Jews and the Gentiles had long been tense, and from time to time Jews had been victims of acts of violence…But after 1881 [the year Antin was born] the violence was organized, systematic, and tolerated – maybe even encouraged – by governments, especially in Russia. (43)

Jewish people of Russia were susceptible to violent attacks, such as “with knives and clubs and scythes and axes,” Antin recalls (10). Gentiles also “killed [Jews] or tortured them, and burned their houses. This was called a ‘pogrom’” (10). Jewish residents of Polotzk did not face such immediate life-threatening conditions, but Antin was familiar with people who escaped other cities and districts in Russia to Polotzk. She records: “Jews who escaped the pogroms came to Polotzk with wounds on them, and horrible, horrible stories…People who saw such things never smiled any more, no matter how long they lived” (10). Although Antin does not discuss her family as pogrom victims, her family was not immune to worsening cruel conditions that eventually forced them to search for a better life outside the Pale.

*The Promised Land* describes Polotzk, within the Pale, as “the place where [Antin] lived”: merely a temporary residential obligation for survival, one she was glad to leave behind (5). For reasons Antin explains in the first half of her narrative, her family (as with many other Jewish community members in the same geographical location) endured challenging living conditions in their home country until their final departure for America.
Polotzk, at the edge of the malleable, political map of Russia, was also metaphorically marginalized. In retrospect, she recognizes her place of dwelling in proximity to the world beyond borders she was not allowed to cross.

Antin describes a socio-spatial system that assigns her an underprivileged status. Life in Polotzk, within the Pale, became increasingly difficult for the Antins. Due to anti-Jewish laws that largely immobilized and restricted them within these borders, Polotzk did not have a better alternative for the Antin family in proximity. Correspondingly, their obligatory residency had inevitable consequences for the Jewish community. Antin writes: “We must not be found outside the Pale, because we were Jews…The world was divided into Jews and Gentiles. This knowledge came so gradually that it could not shock me” (7-8). She grew up identifying as a Jew – which, she knew, meant not-Gentile. Corresponding with historical facts of the Jewish segregation, Antin introduces Polotzk as a place of Jewish oppression. Her childhood memories in the narrative are rooted in this world of divisions. Not knowing a world outside this place segregated from the rest of Russia, Antin grew up to accept their segregation as the norm.

The geography Antin was born into was already a broken one. Antin introduces Polotzk as a place of punitive confinement – separated from the rest of the country:

Polotzk and Vitebsk were bound together by the continuity of the earth, but between them and Russia a formidable barrier still interposed…It seemed there were certain places in Russia – St. Petersburg, and Moscow, and Kiev – where my father or my uncle or my neighbor must not come at all… The police would seize them and send them back to Polotzk, like wicked criminals, although they have done nothing wrong. (7)
Antin does not accept or understand boundaries that deny her community fundamental human rights within the same national borders. They are Russian-Jewish people who are geographically and socially restricted and restrained in the country they are born into. Antin learns that her side of the right/wrong binary is assigned at birth. The Russian governmental system in practice at various levels of their lives determines if or where a Jewish body is allowed to roam. The proximity of widespread violence and fear overshadow Antin’s childhood within the Pale. Antin’s personal story provides an intimate insight into the nineteenth century history of this geography and its transatlantic affect.

Her childhood years taught Antin the unfavorable consequences of being a Jew in Polotzk. As a Russian-Jewish child, Antin lived in a world of confinement. Antin’s narrator resents but also embodies her segregated position in their home country. Russia does not provide fair, safe, or desirable conditions of living for the Jews. Such complexities of systematic oppression are not easily fathomable – especially by a child. Antin experiences direct and indirect consequences but struggles to comprehend them intellectually. She grapples with questions about Russia being off-limits to her and her people. She tries to understand, “Then was Russia more Polotzk? Was there no dividing fence? How I wanted to see Russia! But very few people went there…No, nobody went to Russia for pleasure” (6). And after long sessions of pondering, she concludes: “So there was a fence around Polotzk, after all…It trickled into my consciousness drop by drop” (7-8). Here, Antin refers to Polotzk as a place separated from the rest of the country. Even though this “fence” “was not, as [she] had supposed, a physical barrier, like the fence which divided [their] garden from the street,” it still was a boundary (6). This fence’s ubiquitous existence is lived by
Antin and enacted by the narrative. The barrier that bans her Jewish-identified body from Russia envelops her from the inside “drop by drop” (8).

*The Promised Land* embodies traces of Antin’s lived experiences as well as recreation of stories as part of collective Jewish history. The narrative does not claim to present unfiltered personal or historical facts. In fact, as scholars – including Sollors and Zaborowska – have discussed, the book distinctly challenges autobiographical genre conventions: it blends together elements of fiction and self-life narrative.98 Although Antin does not create imaginative characters and places (as she discusses in “How I Wrote The Promised Land”), she relies on her memory, which admittedly does not always provide historically accurate information, to recreate her past.99 Antin confesses: “As a conscientious historian, I am bound to record every rumor, but I retain the right to cling to my own impression…It is only that my illusion is more real than reality” (66). With this confessional disclaimer, the narrative shows clear awareness of Antin’s intentional reliance on what she remembers to be true. Antin even treats her narratable self as separate from her narrator self or real self. She opens her narrative with the following introductory statement:

> I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life’s story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other

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98 According to Zaborowska, “The Promised Land should not be read as a simple document of immigrant experience, but as a work of fiction” (51). Similarly, Sollors categorizes the work as “a novelistic autobiography” (xii).

99 Scholars who study Antin’s autobiographical memory have noted the significance of Antin’s admittedly unreliable memory. Her grandfather’s garden in Polotzk is a clear example of Antin’s (ab)use of memory in her narrative. About “the [grandfather’s] house, where [she] was born,” Antin writes: “Of the interior of the house I remember only one room, and not so much the room as the window, which had a blue sash curtain, and beyond the curtain a view of a narrow, walled garden, where deep-red dahlias grew… Concerning my dahlias I have been told that they were not dahlias at all, but poppies… I must insist on my dahlias, if I am to preserve the garden at all. I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see poppies in those red masses over the wall, the whole garden crumbles away, and leaves me a gray blank” (66, emphasis in the original).
than the person whose story I have to tell. Physical continuity with my earlier self is no disadvantage. I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for she, and not I, is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began. (1) Through her transatlantic journey that begins in Polotzk, Antin creates her new self with a new life and identity. This self, she considers, is not a linear continuation or progression. She treats her past self as the heroine of her story – a fundamental aspect of the fictionalized life narrative. The Promised Land is a truth; it is Antin’s authentic, inherently unreliable version of truth; it is fictionalized with literarily dissectible elements, such as characters, plot, and setting.

Her strangeness at home is not pure imagination, of course. Her (fictionalized) non-belonging through the narrative is a historically accurate representation of violent Jewish discrimination in late-nineteenth-century Russia. Antin writes: “the knowledge of such things I am telling leaves marks upon the flesh and spirit. I remember little children in Polotzk with old, old faces and eyes glared with secrets” (23). Registered through bodily sensations, her listening to stories of violence (social, economic, and physical) threatening her people cannot be unlearned. The inhumane horror of un-told (“secret”) experiences of many Jewish children and their families remains painfully fresh in Antin’s Polotzk memories enacted by the self-life narrative. She remembers observing visual signs of impact of such trauma on other children around her. What Antin sees, hears, and lives first-hand or in proximity scars her “flesh and spirit” permanently (23).100

100 Such intimate details are often disguised in numbers in books of facts: people like Antin and their stories are reduced to statistical data – quantitative and faceless.
During her early childhood, Antin admits not fully comprehending her community’s marginalization and socio-economic consequences of simply identifying as a Jew. Antin writes:

There was no time in my life when I did not hear and see and feel the truth – the reason why Polotzk was cut off from the rest of Russia. It was the first lesson a little girl in Polotzk had to learn. But for a long while I did not understand. Then there came a time when I knew that Polotzk and Vitebsk and some other places were grouped together as the ‘Pale of Settlement,’ and within this area the Czar commanded me to stay...we must not be found outside the Pale, because we were Jews. (7, emphasis added)

Antin experiences discrimination against the Jews at different levels through both bodily sensations (i.e. hearing and vision) and affective processes (intangible and ongoing). Their physical exclusion from the rest of the country had socio-economic consequences that negatively impacted Antin’s family’s life in the Pale. Her world, “divided into Jews and Gentiles,” was built within “a fence around Polotzk” (7-8). As a Jewish child, Antin belonged within the Pale as a prisoner belongs in prison: “By the time I fully understood I was a prisoner, the shackles had grown familiar to my flesh” (8). Her sense of exclusion and displacement at home are materially registered through the body and reenacted through the autobiographical narrative. Antin’s self-recognition (which cannot be separated from material and immaterial encounters of the flesh-and-blood body) is a process of 101

101 As mentioned earlier, my understanding of the body follows new materialist and affect studies lines of thought. In her sophisticated work on immaterial bodies, Lisa Blackman outlines the genealogy of affect and the body. She provides clear definitions of complex terminology: “Affect is not a thing but rather refers to process of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies and which are difficult to capture or study in any conventional methodological sense” (Blackman 4). Following scholars such as Brian Massumi, Blackman understands affect as “intensity generated between bodies...the biomediated body is both organic and inorganic, living and non-living, material and immaterial” (Blackman 13-14).
estrangement that she could only describe in relation to an image of an enslaved body in chains. The figurative shackles incapacitate the body and create a deep sense of non-belonging and an inherent desire to belong simultaneously.

Antin belonged to Russia under the Czar’s command, but Russia did not belong to Antin. As Sara Ahmed underlines, “[t]he production of the nation involves processes of self-identification in which the nation comes to be realized as belonging to the individual (the construction of the ‘we’ as utterable by the individual)” (98). Early in the narrative, Antin recognizes her bodily presence in a nation space as a forceful obligation. Her desire to belong elsewhere involves elements of fantasy of escape to an imaginary destination.

The first half of The Promised Land depicts a world where “[a] Jew could hardly exist” (23). Polotzk proved to be a place where Jews were systematically marginalized. Unreasonable fines and taxes collected by the Czar rapidly pushed groups of middle or higher-class groups into poverty. Antin’s family “came down from a large establishment…to a single room hired by the week” in a few years (114). Antin writes: “Business really did not pay when the price of goods was so swollen by taxes that the people could not buy. The only way to make business was to cheat – cheat the Government of part of the duties. But playing tricks on the Czar was dangerous, with so many spies watching his interests” (19). Her father’s departure from Polotzk in search of a better life for the family increased her young daughter Maryashe’s awareness of their alienation at home:

While it was nothing new for my father to go far from home in search for his fortune, the circumstances in which he left us were unlike anything we experienced before. We had absolutely no reliable source of income, no settled home, no
immediate prospects. We hardly knew where we belonged in the simple scheme of our society. (114)

Here, Antin refers to both their spatial non-belonging to a geography and metaphorical self-(un)identification with a place and its people. The loss of her national sense of belonging is concurrent with the desire for an alternative, where they could go to survive. Not knowing “where [they] belonged” implies being out of place and being lost. Antin’s writerly voice is evidently desperate; in search of a better place – geographical, economical, and emotional. She emphasizes the unprecedented severity of their estrangement – “unlike anything” – in their home country. Antin describes a changing world system that functions against the Jews. This geography challenged their existence – Russia actively rejected their presence. For the Antins, emigration was an obligatory choice, a desperate paradox.

Writing for Publishing; Publishing for Belonging

And so I was ‘Mary Antin,’ and I felt very important to answer to such a dignified title. It was just like America that even plain people should wear their surnames on week days.

Mary Antin

I should live to know that after my death, my name would be printed in the encyclopedia.

Mary Antin

During summer breaks in Chelsea, Mary Antin spent long hours in the public library touching, breathing, discovering books in fascination. A variety of subjects, historical events, key figures’ names and stories attracted her curiosity. She was inspired greatly by the “biographical sketches of [her] favorite authors, and felt that the worthies must have been glad to die just to have their names and histories printed out in the book of fame [the encyclopedia]” (202). She studied this “book of fame” and others not only for new knowledge and inspiration but also to locate a tangible page in American literary history where her name would appear in permanent ink. Antin writes:
I could not resist the temptation to study the exact place in the encyclopedia where my name would belong. I saw that it would come not far from “Alcott, Louisa M.”, and covered my face with my hands, to hide the silly, baseless joy in it. I practiced saying my name in the encyclopedic form, “Antin, Mary.” (202, emphasis added)

It is not accidental for Antin to record her pretend-author memories in childish naiveté. As this quote shows, she desires her name to belong in this eternal archive. Antin’s name – not her birthname, Maryashe, but her American name, Mary – appearing in print is a fantasy that she harvests with life-long ambition. Antin readily adopts her new name in America. Yet, she considers Mary to be disappointingly similar to her Russian name. As she explains, “[t]he name they gave me was hardly new. My Hebrew name being Maryashe in full, Mashke for short, Russianized into Marya (Mar-ya), my friends said that it would be good in English as Mary; which was disappointing as I longed to possess a strange-sounding American name like others” (149-150). She desires her new name to reflect her new American beginnings. Antin’s American existence requires both accommodation to existing rules and claiming her own identity: while adopting a new name, Mary, means following linguistic systems of the English language, her American belonging suggests her self-invention within and beyond these conventions at the same time.

Writing for a predominantly skeptical native-born-American audience, Antin earned the popularity for which she craved many years with The Promised Land. Her multifaceted belonging in America as an American author is inherently tied to its publication. The wide circulation of this autobiographical narrative carves out the space in American libraries for “Antin, Mary” in proximity to “Alcott, Louisa M” and others in alphabetical order. This book, The Promised Land, which is inextricable from her complex
process of belonging, demonstrates an immigrant child’s mastery of a foreign language; it claims a public space in proximity to its audience and other American publications (and authors); it continually challenges anti-immigrant rhetoric of American exclusion. These functional elements of the book in circulation are not fixed nor predetermined.

In this sense, Antin’s American belonging is a becoming through language. Through the acts of writing and publishing a book in the United States two decades after her initiation, Antin re-discovered, claimed, and challenged the social and geographical borders that determined her circumstantial exclusion and inclusion – both in Polotzk and America. Publishing in America – which means writing for a public audience – and expressing herself to be understood by English-speaking readers required ever-improving language skills. Her exceptional talent discovered and displayed by her teacher, Miss Dillingham, at the public school in Chelsea (when she was twelve years old), paved her way to public success as a pioneer Jewish-American voice in history.

Having been highly impressed by her student’s talent, Miss Dillingham published Antin’s first short story, “Snow,” in the “educational journal” on Antin’s behalf (166). This memory, now permanently part of that journal archive, is a source of pride for Antin. She is a proud narrator whose teacher can testify to her literary talents that make her stand out in her class. Antin is honored to present Miss Dillingham’s description of “Snow” and its young author as it appeared in the periodical: “This is the uncorrected paper of a Russian child twelve years old who had only studied English only four months” (167). The teacher’s publicized reference solidifies Mary as an exceptional talent among other minority students. In addition, the teacher’s brief biographical note introducing the young writer

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102 As Sollors explains, the journal Antin refers to is “the journal Primary Education” (xiv).
presents an exemplary case for first-generation immigrant students. The teacher’s testimonial strongly and convincingly implies that even in a short amount of time, immigrant children – such as Mary Antin – can and will prosper academically in America if given desirable circumstances.

Miss Dillingham’s recognition validates Antin’s confidence in her literary talents and ambitions. Although she presents it wrapped in humility, Antin does not hide nor deny her self-pride in retrospect. Correspondingly, she devotes three pages to celebrate her first published work, “Snow.” The narrative quotes the short story and the teacher’s introduction of the poet at full length. The Promised Land celebrates her early success as a recognized young talent. “I am ashamed of my flippant talk about vanity,” she humbly undercuts her self-admiration in order to acknowledge Miss Dillingham’s role in her first public recognition: “More to me than all the praise I could hope to win by the conquest of fifty languages is the association with this dear friend [Miss Dillingham] with my earliest efforts at writing; and it pleases me to remember that to her I owe my very first appearance in print” (167, emphasis added).103 Antin’s name appeared in public for the first time as the author of “Snow,” the short story. Reading her name in print added another dimension to her self-realization. She not only recognized opportunities that her academic education and her writerly abilities could offer, but also, she understood her published words as her public image – both material and intangible. Antin embarked on her literary journey in English – which eventually led to a place in the former U.S. President’s library (as mentioned earlier)

103 I would not consider Antin’s writerly voice as humble in her narrative. Her writing, overall, is assertive and unapologetic. This example of her acknowledging her teacher’s support is a result of her evident gratitude. Yet, she still considers her own genius to be the gift that she cultivates with lifelong hard work.
– during her early school years in the Massachusetts area. Through the American school system, which she admired deeply, Antin improved her academic skills impressively quick.

Antin created an America in her mind through her father’s letters to the family while he was gone. Antin’s America was a land without barriers against Russian Jews. Correspondingly, and more importantly for Antin, education was free. In Russia, Antin grew up learning that “[a] girl’s real schoolroom was her mother’s kitchen. There she learned to bake and cook and manage, to knit and sew, and embroider…for, of course, every girl hoped to be a wife. A girl was born with no other purpose” (29). Antin, however, was always a child with deep love for words and academic knowledge. In Polotzk, she attended Hebrew school for a short period. Religion did not interest Antin – as a school-subject or as personal inquiry. However, continuing to public education in Polotzk was not an option for her since “[t]here was no public school for girls” (97). There were exclusive private institutions that only admitted students with funding: “a few pupils were maintained in a certain private school by irregular contributions from city funds” (97). Although Antin applied for one of those limited positions, she was denied admission: “my mother is under the impression that it [the application] was plainly refused on account of my religion, the authorities being unwilling to appropriate money for the tuition of a Jewish child” (97). Antin was simply born on the wrong side of the fence: her family’s religious faith and their limited financial resources (as a direct and indirect consequence) left Antin in desperation.

Antin was excited to learn that America could offer academic opportunities they were denied in Russia. Her fascination with freedom of education in America began even before their arrival in Boston. Imagining a land of dreams and opportunities, Antin writes:
Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly, as comprising his chief hope for us children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty. It was one thing that he was able to promise us when he sent for us; surer, safer than bread or shelter.

(148)

Antin’s father’s letters deliver imaginations of a hopeful future. America, in many aspects, means not-Russia. Education, for Antin, is an invaluable “treasure” that is taken away from them in their home country. America promises Antin this fundamental academic right. Freedom of education does not only signify institutional opportunities available at no financial cost, but it also means an inclusive public school system regardless of gender, religion, or other differences. Antin’s narrator “I” knows that their financial circumstances may be less than ideal even after the move.104 Nevertheless, she is overwhelmed with hope and joy to learn in American schools where all children were welcome.105

Until her father was established enough in Boston to bring his family with him, Antin built an America in her imagination. Reading about the academic opportunities her father mentioned in his letters was enough to excite Antin. She learned the name “America” before their departure from Polotzk: “I know the day when ‘America’ as a word entirely unlike Polotzk lodged in my brain, to become the centre of all my dreams and speculations” (113). She records this day with confidence: she “knows” the experience. Knowing is more assertive and certain than remembering. She knows that this word, America, is both alien

104 Here, I am borrowing from Smith and Watson’s study. According to them, the autobiographical “I” should be conceptualized at four different levels: “[t]he ‘real or historical ‘I,’ [t]he narrating ‘I,’ [t]he narrated ‘I,’ [and] [t]he ideological ‘I’” (72).
105 Once in Boston, she, of course, discovers different forms of marginalization and discrimination against different populations, including immigrants like herself. Later in the book, she details life in the slums of Boston and its disadvantaged groups.
and familiar at the same time. She could not even visualize the land with its streets and people accurately; she could not, presumably, spell the word with complete confidence. Her documentation of the moment of this linguistic encounter is strong evidence of the significance of the word *America* and everything it symbolizes for Antin. *America* entered Antin’s at-the-time limited English vocabulary. It was perhaps one of the first words she learned in English. She built her language and her dreams around this linguistic symbol that signified a land far away where education was free – and even Jewish girls could attend school.

Her father’s letters from America excited her for an unknown life in a country beyond the fences of the Pale. Antin writes: “My father was inspired by a vision. He saw something – he promised us something. It was this ‘America.’ And America’ became my dream” (114). Her father, Antin knew, wanted the best for his children. For them, “he argued, every year in Russia was a year lost. They should be spending the precious years in school, in learning English, in becoming Americans” (129). Antin trusted her father’s promise of a better life in America, rooted in its public school system. Institutional education, mastery of the language, and claiming a new national identity are all essential elements of her unending process of coming to belong in America. This process requires negotiating and challenging literal and figurative borders that define “spaces of belonging” (Ahmed 99).

Antin was eager to embark on her academic journey at a public school in Boston where they lived for a short period of time upon their arrival; but to her disappointment, she “had to wait until the opening of the schools in September. What a loss of precious
time – from May till September!” (149). School was at the center of Antin’s new American life. She did not want to waste any time to quench her thirst for knowledge. In his study of the history of the American Jewish experience in the Boston area, Jonathan D. Sarna underlines the importance of education – more than many other immigrant groups – among American Jews. Mary Antin’s notes on her intellectual development provide strong autobiographical evidence for his argument: “Jews…glorified in the ‘intellectuality’ with which they were stereotyped. Mary Antin, author of Boston’s best-known Jewish immigrant autobiography, for example, laid stress on education as the key to the promise of ‘The Promised Land.’ School became her surrogate house of worship” (Sarna 13). Antin admired every aspect of school – from its tangible walls to figurative gates to the knowledge it promised.

Antin’s body experienced the materiality of the school: the body, in blood and flesh, registered the experience of walking through the school building. Mary touched, smelled, saw, heard the environment physically. The architectural structure with its walls and doors suggested a concrete gateway to knowledge and national belonging for Antin: “The doors,” the narrator remembers, “stood open for every one of us…This incident impressed me more than anything I had heard in advance of freedom of education in America” (148). Here, Antin refers to both American freedom of education and physical school building doors at the same time. She attributes a symbolic significance to this concrete object: “It [the door]

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106 The family met the father in Boston and they temporarily rented a place “in the West End” at “Union Place, off Wall Street” (145). Although, Antin writes, others might simply look down upon this area as a poor slum neighborhood occupied by marginalized peoples of the society, in the eyes of a twelve-year-old immigrant child, Union Place was the beginning of a new and better life: “I saw two imposing rows of brick buildings, loftier than any dwelling I had ever lived in…I looked up to the topmost row of windows, and my eyes were filled with the May blue of an American sky!” (145, 146). The Antins lived here for a few months, but Antin had to wait for school until they relocated to Chelsea for purely financial reasons. “In Chelsea, as in Boston, we made our stand in the wrong end of town” (155).
was a concrete proof – almost the thing itself. One had to experience it to understand it” (148). In this quote, the door becomes a concrete threshold Antin crosses to become an insider. While other boundaries of her past mark her exclusion and disadvantaged position in Russia, the American school door signifies a threshold of inclusion. Once inside, she would access privileges that come with her membership to her academic community. Until this point in her life, Antin was an outsider trapped within the discriminatory boundaries of the Pale. Contrastingly in Boston, she desired to be within the walls of the public-school building. Crossing this threshold freely initiated Antin’s real American experience.107

Not every Russian Jewish immigrant girl was granted educational freedom and opportunities like Antin, however. For instance, Mary’s older sister Frieda was considered too old to start an academic journey when the academic semester began in Boston. She was given domestic duties and financial responsibilities (such as sewing) to support the family in America. Antin writes: “There was no choosing possible; Frieda was the oldest, the strongest, the best prepared, and the only one who was of legal age to be put to work” (159). In her recollections, Antin admits not worrying about how her passion for school might affect others in the family: “I was no heartless monster, but a decidedly self-centered child” (159). Antin does not apologize for centering her attention solely on getting an American education even if this means her sister’s obligatory self-sacrifice. The narrative demonstrates awareness of the younger sister Mary’s advantages in America. Consequently, the more Antin advances academically, the more the two sisters fall apart intellectually and emotionally. In demonstration of Mary’s presumable guilt of her

107 Antin soon discovered intangible boundaries that envelop disadvantaged populations of Boston slums. As I discuss later in this chapter, Antin’s documented American citizenship does not grant her acceptance and inclusion into the dominant American social life.
arguably self-centered acts for advancement, the narrative welcomes the reader into Antin’s world with a photograph of the two when they were in Russia: “Mashke and Fetchke” in their Russian names (Figure 9).

The day Mary Antin ran through the school door “on winged feet of joy and expectation; it was she [Frieda] whose feet were bound in the treadmill of daily toil” (159). And Antin never looked back. From the day she stepped into her first classroom, Antin considered school as her responsibility – not just to herself but also to her family: her “business was to go to school, to learn everything there was to know, to write poetry, become famous, and make the family rich…[she] had boundless faith in [her] future” (229). The memory of her body moving through the material boundaries of the public school through “the doors” that “stood open for every one of [them]” gave Antin a sense of acceptance that she pragmatically exploited as part of a strategy of national belonging (148). A gifted student, Antin demonstrated passion for educational advancement. She especially improved her skills in English and produced written pieces that attracted her teacher’s attention.

Antin discovered at an early age the nonnegotiable power of literacy in America – this power she would soon be able to productively exploit through her writing and publications. Immersed in English, Antin played with words, creating new meanings to self-express. She soon discovered how her writing could make her name honorably public. While at school, she wrote for her first audience, who was primarily the teachers. She wanted to be recognized through her words in English. The act of writing for an audience initiated her transformation from an “invisible” (and stereotypically unqualified) immigrant girl to a published American writer.
Antin’s belonging is a becoming through language. Her relationship with the English language is a fundamental element of this ongoing process. Antin’s literacy journey is not a passive absorption but an active “conquest” in her own words. Starting in middle school, she worked hard to learn the language well enough to manipulate words and syntax to make it her own. Her first story (“Snow”) to appear in the school journal reassured Antin and inspired her to work harder and write more for a growing audience. For Antin, her published work – however unpolished or small it may be – was an extension of her corporeal body. Reflecting on the experience of publishing “Snow,” Antin writes: “my own words that I had written out of my own head – printed out, clear, black and white, with my name at the end! Nothing so wonderful had ever happened to me before…I

suppose that was the moment when I became a writer” (167-168, emphasis added). For Antin, being a “writer” meant being published. Her printed and circulated words in the school journal initiated Antin’s writerly becoming. Moreover, she did not just become a writer, but an *American* writer – at least an aspiring one – with her first published piece. “Snow” helped Antin discover writing not just as a strategy to self-express but as a practice to publicly exist – therefore open possibilities of belonging on American soil through a new language.

Writing for an American audience excited Antin – as much as permanently marking a physical space for that audience and locating her typeface signature in print. As the author of “Snow,” seeing her name printed on a page that is accessible to a wider audience also meant unprecedented pride, ambition, and hope. Reflecting on the moment of self-realization, Antin writes:

> I stared at my name: MARY ANTIN…If that was my name, and those were the words out of my own head, what relation did it all have to *me*, who was alone there with Miss Dillingham, and the printed page between us? Why, it meant that I could write again, and see my writing printed for people to read! I could write many, many, many things! I could write a book! (168)

Staring at her name printed as the author of her piece was a major developmental moment for Antin. She stared at her name as a child would stare and observe her mirror reflection for the first time. Her lingering gaze upon the name that was given to her upon their

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108 In her recollections, she significantly blends together tangible and abstract elements. The act of producing “Snow” interconnects the body (in blood and flesh) with the abstractness of language. Her reflections emphasize the materiality of the work (including the paper that displays her final product with ink) and “her own head,” which is biological and tangible but also connects the blood-and-flesh mortality to abstract elements of life (thoughts and emotions).

109 This pivotal moment in her life could be analyzed with one of Jacques Lacan’s most well-known psychoanalytic theories: the mirror stage (see Lacan’s *Ecrits* for a detailed discussion).
arrival suggests elements of awe and self-alienation simultaneously. Seeing her American name occupy a sophisticated public space promises tangible inclusion to a socially excluded immigrant body. Her subtle disbelief in her accomplishment as MARY ANTIN (all in capital typeface) is her awakening to a reassuring evidence of her literary talents, passion, and hard work. Reflecting on this experience, she demonstrates desire for her name to occupy more pages in periodicals and shelves in libraries.

Antin’s continuous becoming an American through *The Promised Land* thus coincides productively with her relationship with the English language. During her early school years, the act of writing functioned as a tool of self-expression and discovery. Her identity evolved with her vocabulary. For Antin, English education was not a passive process of sheer memorization. Instead, “getting a language,” for Antin, “word by word, has a charm that may be set against disadvantages. It is like gathering a posy blossom by blossom” (166, emphasis added). Claiming a new language despite the inherent challenges (which Antin refers to as “disadvantages”) of being an immigrant/outsider also suggests possibilities of claiming an insider position: belonging with the birth-right inhabitants of that land and language. Antin describes mastering a new vocabulary as a strategy of belonging that requires a creative act of conquest. This triumphant activism is not violent or against an identified target, however. Her “getting” a language resembles entering a field of flowers where she gathers colors to make bouquets her own. “Getting a language” also suggests bodily engagements with tangible tools and resources (people, teachers, books

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110 Learning from earlier immigrant experiences, the Antins adopted not only a new lifestyle but also new names: “we shed also our impossible Hebrew names…The name they gave me was hardly new. My Hebrew name being Maryashe in full, Mashke for short, Russianized into Marya (*Mar-ya*), my friends said that it would hold good in English as *Mary*; which was very disappointing, as I longed to possess a strange-sounding American name like the others…And so I was ‘Mary Antin,’ and I felt very important to answer to such a dignified title” (149-150).
and dictionaries) and intangible elements of language expressed through linguistic symbols.

Through writing, Antin not only discovered words “blossom by blossom,” but she also embarked on a self-discovery journey within and through these words (166). Beginning with her short story “Snow,” she developed confidence as a prospective writer and concurrently nourished cohesion between her body (as can be seen in phrases she uses such as “out of my own head”), her name printed on the page, and the readers (her fellow citizens). Antin’s strategies of belonging center on her (self-claimed) exceptional literary talents that help her stand out as a proud Russian-born American. The more she learned about America through reading and writing, the more she knit her love for the country and language together.

She especially found American history to be impressive and inspiring. She not only studied national history with its celebrated heroes, but she also actively contributed to and interpreted the archive. For instance, while still in school, she wrote and recited a poem in celebration of George Washington. She admired Washington’s grandeur as a fellow American citizen: “this George Washington, who died long before I was born, was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens…Undoubtedly, I was a Fellow Citizen, and George Washington was another” (176, 177). For Antin, expressing her thoughts on this admired historical figure through her growing vocabulary and orally delivering the product in front of an audience meant more than just practicing her literary talents. Her ability (physical, mental and social) to write poetry (in English) in dedication to an American Founding Father provides a strong argument for her national identity.
beyond legal documentation. Antin belongs in America – as much as Washington did – and America belongs to Antin and her fellow citizens, immigrant or US-born alike.

Writing a poem about Washington is more than a school assignment for Antin. Through this opportunity, she expresses her desired connection to a hero of American national roots. Her ability to interpret a key moment in American history challenges invisible boundaries of urban slums where she attended school. This poem celebrates “immortal Washington, who always did in truth confide” (181). Similarly, Antin desires literary immortality – like the “heroic figure” Washington “who gave his land its liberty” – and does so through educating her fellow classmates and fellow citizens on American history – their (promised) land of freedom and equality (180, 181).

The process of producing the verses to share with her classmates and later with a larger local audience is a deeply sentimental one related to emotions and registered through the body. The narrator describes her composing the poem about Washington as an act of interconnection between her mind and soul for her reader – a tedious but rewarding experience:

The process of putting on paper the sentiments that seethed in my soul was really very discomposing. I dug the words out of my heart, squeezed the rhymes out of my brain, forced the missing syllables out of their hiding-places in the dictionary… When I had done, I was myself impressed with the length, gravity, and nobility of my poem [about Washington]. (179, 180)

Evident in this example, Antin’s writing is an extension of the corporeal body. She understands words-on-paper as transformed heavy emotions she registered through her body. Her knowledge and skills are in a homogenous unity with the anatomical body parts,
such as “heart” and “brain,” as she details (179). Antin locates these two members of the body using scientific terminology. These bodily references figuratively show the material involvement of her mortal existence in the act of writing. Her “heart,” a key member of the human anatomy, signifies her emotional connection to her creative content. Her self-excavation for words buried in her heart suggests intimacy of the writing process for her. While the words that represent strong felt-emotions come from the heart, her “brain” organizes rhymes – following conventions of the genre. Composing and “discomposing” occurs simultaneously during the process of writing (179). As the narrative details, her body is self-aware of the spatial abilities and limitations of its environmental circumstances. Her writing body is vulnerable and capable at the same time. Writing is admittedly a challenging act for Antin. It requires hard labor – perhaps more than exceptional talent. The words she searches for need locating and “digging” out of their forgotten places in libraries. Through steps and strategies that bridge the gap between the body, the emotions it expresses, and language, she writes a poem that is a profound experience even for the poet/writer herself.

Her description of the composing process as “discomposing” suggests admitted frustration and anxiety in her efforts to demonstrate linguistic competence (and possibly superiority to her fellow classmates and other young immigrants in the U.S.). Her metaphorical excavation of words out of her brain and the dictionary demonstrates dedication and passion. The presentation of the Washington poem is a result of her academic, social, and personal ambitions. Her hard work blends together the body, sensations, abstract emotions, physical circumstance, and language.
Antin’s belonging through language does not depend entirely on the genius of the immigrant child. Academic tools and technologies available to her are equally (if not more) important in her short-term and long-term success and belonging. When describing the creative measures of her Washington poem, Antin highlights not only her writerly skills and abilities but also literary technologies that are available to her. She locates “missing syllables” she needs to complete her work “in the dictionary” (179). Through multiple degrees of interpretation and translation, Antin re-writes her version of this American hero. Her writing process cannot be divorced from the technologies and resources that are elements of her affective body: pen, paper, books, libraries, and teachers.

Antin knew where and how to look for linguistic translations of her complex emotions. Her classmates ask Antin with envy: “Mary Antin, how could you think of all these words? None of them thought of the dictionary” (183). It is not accidental that Antin quotes her classmates using her full name “Mary Antin” – instead of “Mary.” In addition to demonstrating her literary and academic skills, her writing also proves to be a powerful practice for leadership and public influence. Her writing, evidently better quality than that of her peers, makes her stand out. Following the first part of the Washington poem she quotes in the narrative, Antin writes: “the best part of the verses were no better than these, but the children listened. They had to” (181). Antin understands the naiveté of her verses in retrospect, but she also acknowledges the gates those verses would open for her in the moment and in the future. Her unending process of belonging entails claimed and demonstrated leadership. She does not blend in, but paradoxically stands out to belong. Through acts of writing and publishing, she earns respect and admiration of her peers, who are also members of disadvantaged communities of urban slums. At the same time, her
exceptional talents and dedication make her a self-declared “princes [sic] waiting to be led to the throne [sic],” in the ambitious words that concludes her book (280).

Her school-wide success encouraged Antin towards bigger accomplishments. She desired to reach a wider audience and determined – with some influence – to publish her school-wide success poem about George Washington in a local periodical of Boston. In her narrative, she is proud to admit:

If I had been satisfied with my poem in the first place, the applause…convinced me that I had produced a fine thing indeed. So the person, whoever it was – perhaps my father – who suggested that my tribute to Washington ought to be printed did not find me difficult to persuade. When I had achieved an absolutely perfect copy of my verses, at the expense of a dozen sheets of blue-ruled note paper, I crossed the Mystic River to Boston and boldly invaded Newspaper Row. (183)

As this example demonstrates, the narrator is admittedly motivated by public praise. Even though her high self-esteem is enough to convince herself of the quality of her work, she highlights compliments as public recognition and reaffirmation. Both the content and quality of her piece impress her proud father (presumably) who encourages Antin to publish it.

It is important to note that bringing her poem to publishers’ attention required Mary Antin to take a trip across the river from Arlington Street to Newspaper Row in Boston. In the narrative, Antin describes carrying (physically) her tangible poem written on a piece of “blue-ruled note paper” as a “bold” act of “invasion” (183). She is brave for multiple reasons. She is an inexperienced, unpublished writer looking for recognition. In addition, her social status as a marginalized immigrant places her at a vulnerable disadvantage within
or outside her neighborhood. Correspondingly, she is a resident of the urban slums in the outskirts of the city.

After perfecting her piece to her satisfaction, Antin took her precious creation across the river. In fact, the poem itself also allowed her body to travel out of the slums, “inhabited by poor Jews, poor Negroes, and a sparkling of poor Irish” (155). Not only did Antin carry her poem in her hands, but also her creation metaphorically carried her immigrant body – though temporarily – out of the slums. Arlington Street was not an area of confinement or legalized segregation. Yet, it was still considered “the wrong end of town” (155). Its occupants were predominantly lower-class and disadvantaged groups disintegrated from the dominant American culture. The slums, as The Promised Land shows, remain a form of confinement for Antin with new intangible boundaries she dares to challenge. Her family could not yet afford to live in a wealthier neighborhood, but her poem, once published in “the ‘Herald’” of Boston, would occupy an honorable public space and circulate all neighborhoods in the Boston area. Antin knew that her piece, once in the paper, would find wide readership: “And all these people in the streets, and more, thousands of people – all in Boston! – would read my poem, and learn my name, and wonder who I was” (186). Her memorable visit to the Boston Herald (following another failed attempt prior) proved to be a success. The poem, published in the paper, displayed the proud poet’s name. Her name, an extension of its creator, trespassed socio-spatial boundaries. Although a debut poem by itself could not promise a permanent relocation of the corporeal body into spaces occupied by dominant populations with higher-class privileges, it provided her body the opportunity to travel across the river. It was the material
evidence she carried in her hand to present Boston publishers that gave her a self-claimed right and reason to walk through the city.

As with many other marginalized groups who are geographically separated from the dominant, more privileged populations, Antin was a resident of the urban slums outside Boston. She writes:

Anybody who is acquainted with the slums of any American metropolis knows that that is the quarter where poor immigrants foregather, to live, for the most part, as unkept, half-washed, toiling, unaspiring foreigners, pitiful in the eyes of social missionaries, the despair of boards of health, the hope of ward politicians, the touchstone of American democracy. The well-versed metropolitan knows the slums as a sort of house of detention for poor aliens, where they live on probation till they can show a certificate of good citizenship. (145, emphasis added)

Upon their arrival in their new neighborhood, Antin began to observe the different kinds of separation between different groups of people. Although the slums of Boston were not segregated with a “fence” – as in Polotzk – the invisible line that socio-geographically marginalized disadvantaged groups was clearly defined, and corresponding rules were strictly observed. Through the description of the slums she provides in the narrative, Antin shows the reader the stereotypical profile of the marginalized groups of the slums. Low hygiene and poverty create tangibly visible markers of lower-class status that make these populations an easy target for American scrutiny.

Directly addressing her fellow Americans (presumably US-born white citizens) who might be inclined to frown upon new immigrants and other inhabitants of urban slums in America, Antin writes:
Dozens of these men [like her father and other Jews, specifically] pass under your eyes every day, my American friend, too absorbed in their honest affairs to notice the looks of suspicion which you cast at them, the repugnance with which you shrink from their touch…What if the creature with the untidy beard carries in his bosom his citizenship papers?…Think every time you pass the greasy alien on the street, that he was born thousands of years before the oldest native American; and he may have something to communicate to you, when you two shall have learned a common language. (144, emphasis added)

Antin’s audience here is directly her fellow Americans. She confidently criticizes their prejudice against immigrants, like her father and the rest of her family, who work hard to build a life and contribute to the American society as documented immigrant citizens. When other mediums prove ineffective to claim her belonging, Antin embraces literacy – not just the ability to read and write in English, but also the right she claims to reach “[her] American friend,” who needs to open their eyes to see beyond “the greasy alien” and all fellow citizens (114). Legally crossing the national border and obtaining official documents grant citizenship but not a national sense of belonging to immigrant populations. Belonging, rather, paradoxically embodies lived experiences of exclusion and inclusion in an ever-continuing process.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, American literary scholarship began challenging literary canonization that is rooted in an American language produced and guarded by elitist groups that advocate for an exclusive understanding and practice of Americanism. As Melinda G. Gray emphasizes, “[r]ecent scholarship has begun to consider a body of writing (newspapers, novels, poetry, and essays) from nineteenth-century American in languages other than Howell’s American English” (94). The underlining rigidities of arbitrary boundaries that language constructs upon peoples and landscapes put Antin’s vulnerability and capabilities into perspective. Her American language is not granted by birth. Yet, the language of the Boston slums, where she spends her adolescent years, is quintessentially American. Antin’s language is of a temporal landscape shaped by its people and materialities converging in an evolving urban landscape in America. The people of the Boston slums shape this environment and are shaped by it simultaneously.
Conclusion

Immigration and the immigrant are not novel public conflicts in the United States. In a 1916 letter (four years after the publication of *The Promised Land*) addressed to Mary Antin in response to one of her lectures on the immigrant question, Ruth F. Woodsmall asked:

Has not America by your own admission exemplified, as no other country on the globe, the doctrine of Liberty and Equality? Are not you [Mary Antin] yourself, in your utter freedom of speech a perfect example of the liberty which America accords to one and all within her gates?...We can of course fully appreciate your plea for the immigrant. We admit that there are many deplorable conditions in our country, and that America has not yet adequately solved the problem of the immigrant. (qtd. in Salz 153) 112

In this letter, Woodsmall challenges Antin, an advocate for immigrants perhaps less fortunate than herself. Pointing out the mere act of public speaking, or her “utter freedom of speech,” Woodsmall regards Antin’s ability to raise her voice (literally and figuratively) for other immigrants as a living proof of de facto freedom and equality-for-all in America (153). The content of her letter as well as the style begs for an affirmative response from Antin. Woodsmall’s tone here can arguably be read as accusatory as well, accusing Antin of being an ungrateful immigrant for all America has offered her. In her public efforts to

112 As this letter demonstrates, immigration in America has historically been an urgent public and political concern. David A. Gerber aptly summarizes, “since its founding in 1789, the United States has experienced almost constant immigration, but especially noteworthy have been three massive waves of voluntary international migration reconfigured the population: (1) in the 1840s and 1850s, (2) from the late 1890s to World War I, and (3) in recent decades dating from changes in American immigration law in 1965” (2).
speak in favor of the immigrant, Antin’s national belonging – if not her legal citizenship – continues to be directly and indirectly challenged.

Mary Antin is, by her own account, an *American* author. Even the simple fact that this statement could trigger debates centering on definitions and privileges of Americanness proves the fragility of Antin’s ongoing process of belonging.\(^{113}\) “Although Antin possesses legal rights and documentation of legal citizenship, the narrative shows awareness of her marginalized-immigrant position as an outsider to the dominant American social life. Mary Antin is not a finished product of American history. Instead, her book’s active circulation continues her complex course of ever-becoming. *The Promised Land* challenges limited definitions of Americanness and productively stretches exclusive lists of the literary canon. Her deceptively simple question still begs for an answer: “How long, would you say, wise reader, it takes [sic] to make an American?” (175).

\(^{113}\) During fall 2017, I taught *The Promised Land* in my Introduction to Women’s Literature course. Some of my students grappled with questions of being an American through Antin’s national-identity claims. Who, then, we asked, is an American in a country that is built on immigration?
CODA

WHERE I “DON’T LOOK DANGEROUS”

During his highly controversial presidential campaign in 2015, Donald J. Trump released a written copy of a statement to correct any media “misunderstanding or misinterpretation” (qtd. in Walker). In that statement, he re-emphasized his unapologetic views on immigration and border protection – primarily the US-Mexico border: “tremendous infectious disease is pouring across the border. The United States has become a dumping ground for Mexico, in fact, for many other parts of the world” (qtd. in Walker).

Following the 2016 elections that resulted in Donald J. Trump’s Presidency in the United States, heated debates on national border protection and immigration – among others – echoed across the country and abroad. Several American college campuses hosted activist movements and rallies in support of multinational diversity in a political environment that directly threatened international individuals, families, and communities. Physical exclusion (or the fear of) that meant deportation or denial of admission inside borders triggered physical and online protests in the country. Around this time in Lexington, Kentucky, the University of Kentucky’s (UK) campus-wide campaign, “You Belong Here,” emerged as a public declaration of diversity in action. It directly addressed campus community members and delivered the message that they *belonged* at UK, individually and collectively. With this message, the UK Campus community demonstrated commitment to an inclusive living and learning environment with a promise of belonging for students for whom inclusion is not always socially and politically granted.

Sometime that same year, I ordered a drink at a restaurant in Lexington and presented my Kentucky driver’s license to the server on duty. Locating the birth date on
the ID card was an uncomplicated task, but deciphering my name, Gokce Tekeli, required at least a few more seconds. Observing his perplexed reaction was a familiar experience for me: I was used to spelling out my non-American name to strangers. Yet, what caught me by surprise was a presumably local gentleman’s unsolicited and presumptuous involvement in my exchange with the server. As I was explaining that Gokce was a Turkish name, I noticed the gentleman who was eyeing me from head to foot. My odd-sounding name coupled with a foreign country, which many people may not be able to locate on a world map, might have easily made him uncomfortable. Immediately after the server left, the man exclaimed: “You don’t look dangerous!” His elevated voice, perhaps with good (yet ignorant) intentions communicated a disturbing delight and a subtle relief. His arbitrary and skin-deep criteria to judge an individual’s level of threat-potential marked me “safe” despite my alien name. With an obligatory (but bitter) nod of acknowledgement, I turned my gaze away. But I could not verbally address the situation in the moment. The circumstances were not ideal to unpack the negative implications and larger consequences of such a statement for a man who was easily twenty years older and ten inches taller than me.  

Ironically, his admitted comfort in my appearance (gender, skin tone, hair color, age, height, etc.) stirred my feelings of discomfort and insecurity. This experience was a distinct reminder of my permanently outsider position in a country where I desired to develop a strong sense of belonging. It was also a clear indicator of my physical privileges (arbitrarily determined by unfixed external conditions) that largely disguise my racial and national heritage in public.

114 I cannot help but wonder how he would have reacted if our roles were reversed.
My personal experiences as a foreigner studying American women’s literature in the United States have undeniably influenced my research interests. It is no coincidence that my dissertation studies women’s belonging. From the day I began working on *Where We Belong*, I have been aware (and perhaps self-conscious) of the autobiographical elements that have inspired me personally and academically. Correspondingly, borrowing genre elements from self-life narratives, I wanted this closing to express my personal connections to this project. As a first-generation Turkish immigrant whose American life has been built on unstable borders and relations between the two countries, I have experienced my own version of being an outsider inside. In the midst of the socio-political chaos of 2010s in my home country, I experienced conflicting feelings of national detachment and longing for my roots at the same time.\footnote{Especially the coup d’état attempt of 2016 that created an unfavorable environment for Turkish people – both within the national borders and beyond. Several academics (as well as other professionals in various fields) got arrested and/or lost their jobs in the aftermath. This topic continues to be a dangerous one in Turkey, where freedom of speech remains a disregarded right. And that is why it is in a footnote in this dissertation.} My home country has gone through major political, economic, and social changes that has directly or indirectly inspired a significant percentage of the young, educated population to seek opportunities elsewhere. Over the past few years, my home country has become an undesirable environment for me to build a personal life or a professional career. Meanwhile, being an immigrant in the US has become increasingly more difficult. Despite anxieties caused by unpredictable immigration policies, however, I am now here to stay. I agree with Zaborowska’s observation “that there is no ‘going back.’ Once you leave your country for long enough, there is no other ‘America’ beyond this present one to emigrate to. Once here, you are stuck in the Promised Land” (281). And, for me, in this Promised Land, my sense
of belonging oscillates between passing as a white American woman and posing a threat as a Muslim Middle-Eastern.

In my research, which is rooted in clear self-indulgent fascinations, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of underrepresented nineteenth-century women, with whom I was not familiar until graduate school. When I read Keckley’s work for the first time, I wondered what it meant for a former-slave, black woman to write a book with the White House in its title. How did she, I asked, enter the White House physically? Where did she sit while making Mrs. Lincoln’s dresses? How did she write about herself? Why did she gloss over a significant portion of her life? The spatial details in Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes* captured my curiosity and planted the seeds of this project. Similarly, I inquired into questions of *where* in Potter’s and Antin’s narratives respectively. All three women challenged my learned expectations about meanings, experiences, and expressions of the American woman. In addition to its central argument about underrepresented women’s spatial negotiations, this dissertation calls attention to details that are imperative in twenty-first-century conversations that have immediate and material consequences. More specifically, for instance, questions about women’s bodies and consent. While such details are beyond the scope of this dissertation, they are still, perhaps more than ever, important for women’s movements around the world.

Interpreting the narratives of Potter, Keckley, and Antin from where I stand, as an admittedly privileged immigrant in twenty-first-century America, I valued the importance of the individual challenges these women faced in their own historical moments. Writing *Where We Belong*, I read each woman’s life through their own words; I listened to their silences between the lines. (And reflected on my own.) The closer I studied each woman,
the more I understood their challenges and strengths, unique to their circumstances and socio-spatial negotiations.

In the proposal stages of my research, the title *Where We Belong* suggested itself as an excellent phrase to capture the essence of my investigation. This title emphasized the twofold goal of my project: I wanted my project to both question where these marginalized and exceptional women belonged – then and now – and create a literary-space where they belonged together despite their differences. Just as their individual elements challenge dominant patterns of cultural and literary criticism, their inclusion in one project offers alternative and productive dialogues both for the long nineteenth-century and today.

This dissertation was a discovery process for me. I explored layers of American history and literature that are beyond the dominant narratives especially privileged by academic curriculums. It empowered, inspired, and challenged me as an immigrant claiming her own voice through a scholarly contribution to American studies. Understanding the importance of American women’s inclusive history that re-introduces forgotten voices and acknowledging socio-political conflicts of our era that threaten individuals and communities, I hope to continue asking difficult questions raised and explored by this scholarly investigation. Even though a dissertation could be considered a complete project, I expect *Where We Belong* to help initiate and continue discoveries of forgotten voices and new meanings that enrich critical discussions about American literary history.


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