

“A Ladylike Employment”: Jennie Carter and the Performance of African American Womanhood in Reconstruction-era California

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This essay illustrates how Reconstruction-era journalist Jennie Carter borrowed the popular tropes of her eastern contemporaries and the cult of True Womanhood to legitimate her public voice as both an activist and a black woman. Conditions in the West allowed for her to break out of some of the more restrictive eastern traditions of black respectability, such as the reliance on rhetoric about light skin, desexualization, and overall rebuttals to plantation writing. Instead, Carter was able to extend her use of the respectability discourse to discuss temperance and to mobilize community activism around local politics. In other respects, Carter replicated the eastern tropes of black respectability that were most reliant on the cult of white True Womanhood—namely, the ideals of domesticity articulated in the figure of the maternalistic schoolmarm.

INTRODUCTION

On Independence Day in 1868, an African American woman from Nevada County, California set down to paper her earnest plea to resurrect the black public school of San Francisco after a city decree that all “except the colored school” would open two days later. “How long must we tamely submit to all this injustice? Must our children grow up in ignorance, to make true their estimate of inferiority?” she asked the readers of the *Elevator*. “If I were a man, I would battle until death; but as I am merely Mrs. Trask, I will have to keep in my place. They cannot prevent me from talking and writing, and my tongue and pen shall be busy.”¹

These were the words of Jennie Carter, who wrote a column of didactic essays for children in the San Francisco-based African American newspaper *The Elevator* and, later, in the *Christian Recorder*. Her columns evolved to include a variety of narratives on race, politics, and womanhood, spoken through the semi-autobiographical voice of an elderly narrator alternately identified as “Mrs. Ann J. Trask” and “Semper Fidelis,” or “always faithful.” No known photographs of Jennie Carter exist. And yet, through her writings, Carter offers historians an opportunity to complicate the image of the western black female activist. While little is known about her life, her published articles provide us with a glimpse of an otherwise obscured view of black women’s potential views, platforms, and experiences of effecting racial uplift in the Reconstruction-era America of the trans-Mississippi West.

In 2007, literary historian Eric Gardner published a volume of Carter’s collected known writings, *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West*. Gardner’s recovery work has allowed this obscure but fairly prolific

black writer a chance to rise into the same academic discourse that more well-known figures like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Ida B. Wells have been circulating for years. This essay will insert Jennie Carter into this historical discussion by comparing her methods of public self-representation with that of Maria W. Stewart and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. These women’s fiction, public personas, and moral investments embodied some of the prevailing urban images of the nineteenth-century African American woman activist. Gardner’s introduction to the volume of Jennie Carter’s columns urges this kind of comparative inquiry, and this is a task that will, I hope, illuminate the acceptable methods available in the nineteenth-century for black women to represent themselves as public activists.²

Carter’s literary voice must be examined against the backdrop of the monolithic images of the respectable black woman and Reconstruction activist of the mid-Atlantic. What was it about the sociopolitical conditions of the West that made “respectable womanhood” the most logical and accessible performance available to black female activists who wanted to enter public discourse? In the East, the image of respectability was made all the more relevant in light of the recent memory of slavery and black female sexualization—immediate and pressing concerns for a region where the majority of African Americans were illiterate and most black women were employed as domestic servants. Carter, on the other hand, was writing for a western black population that was already comprised primarily of a literate middle class. Speaking to an already “respectable” black public, then, made it even more compelling and necessary for women like Carter to operate within the established rhetoric of respectability. Such an inquiry into this kind of gender performance can ultimately provide insight into the history of black feminist activism

and the tenor of racial history in the West, a challenge that is illustrated in existing scholarship on these fraught and complex subjects.

Unlike existing literature on the subject, this essay will read the works of monolithic mid-Atlantic black activists like Frances Harper against this newly discovered western counterpart in an attempt to test the powerful images of nineteenth-century black “respectable womanhood.” By conducting a careful content analysis of Jennie Carter’s collected works, written and published from 1867 to 1873, I intend to illustrate the provisions under which black women in the West were able to construct a socially-sanctioned public voice and image and how these terms were shaped by the transcontinental discourse on respectable African American womanhood. The tropes Carter employs surprisingly and closely resemble the images of the respectable black woman established by the literary traditions of mid-Atlantic activists.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD AND THE BLACK WOMAN-OF-LETTERS

The legacy of African-American women writers and activists of the nineteenth-century North and South is structured around a dominant discourse of female respectability. The cult of True Womanhood offered many opportunities for black women to redefine themselves after slavery; it also established a number of constraints that they were forced to act within and resist. Jennie Carter, as we shall see, broke free of some of these more constricting rhetorical traditions. An understanding of the constraints of respectability (as defined by the cult of True Womanhood) will be crucial to make sense of the similarities and differences between Carter’s self-representations and those of her eastern contemporaries.

Since the late 1960s, American women’s history has discussed the ideal image of the nineteenth-century “woman” through the concept of a pervasive cult of True Womanhood. True Womanhood was defined by what Barbara Welter called the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”³ While not all women living in the nineteenth century actually adhered to these ideals, they were, for all intents and purposes, culturally recognized and shared characteristics for the ideal woman. All of these traits were, moreover, explicitly attributed to white women.

The cult of True Womanhood led black literary traditions throughout the nineteenth century, the tenor of which can be traced from the works of Maria W. Stewart, the first recorded woman of any race to lecture on political and theological subjects in public, onward to the works of Frances Harper and the primary subject of this paper, Jennie Carter. The dominant representations of activist black womanhood employed by these women are the maternalistic educator of the race, the intellectual woman-

of-letters, and the light-skinned black woman. These images encompass intermingling concerns about the place of female voice, action, and image, all of which are only further complicated by the aforementioned nineteenth-century constructions of “womanhood” writ large.

The cult of True Womanhood created the boundaries wherein respectability for black women was defined. Black activist women of the mid-Atlantic borrowed from the cult of True Womanhood, bending the model of white femininity to meet their own needs. They borrowed from, played against, and played to aspects of the cult to their advantage, but its tenants also constrained what they could say and do as activists and respectable women. In the same motion that the cult of True Womanhood allowed black women to be public speakers and authors, it kept them restrained to the particular genres of their white literary exemplars—primarily poets and writers of romantic fiction. It also constrained them to a very specific activist discourse, which emphasized the cultural politics of African American social roles but barred them from legislative political activism around issues like women’s suffrage.

The works of Maria W. Stewart deftly illustrate some of the earliest rhetorical approaches of black female activism at the time of its recordable inception. Stewart’s political speeches and pamphlets, written, circulated, and presented in Boston and the *Liberator* from 1831-33, predated the likes of such monolithic figures as Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass.⁴ Stewart’s “evangelical” rhetorical style and the evolution of her views on appropriate female spheres of action were deeply informed by her religious beliefs.⁵ Stewart’s texts reveal the tensions circulating between the ideal of True Womanhood as a tool for uplifting black women and the then-problematic visions of intellectual power and religious mission that Stewart developed in her readings of the Bible and historical/philosophical texts. The latter influences necessitated the conflicting shift from her original “ideal of black womanhood”⁶ in what Richardson characterizes as an evolution from the acceptable voice of the woman-as-“teacher” to the radical “prophet” role of a woman driven to publicly preach a “social gospel.”⁷

Therefore, Stewart’s works reflect the early nineteenth-century rhetorical attachments to (and implications of) the white standards of True Womanhood and the nascent development of an intellectual (as well as theological) black women’s culture as part of the black activist identity. Examining how women such as Stewart chose to navigate between these conflicting identities in the antebellum period will help inform my later inquiries into Reconstruction-era activist identity in the black press by providing a point of comparison. Ultimately, Stewart retreated from her daring spiritually-driven arguments for racial uplift and returned to the conservative, acceptable tradition of the “teacher”—this time quite literally. Following her years of speaking and publishing in Boston,

Stewart moved to New York and cultivated a career as a teacher at an all-black school. I will return later to the centrality of the image of the black-woman-as-educator and the ways in which the limitations of this trope are indebted to the cult of True Womanhood.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free-born Maryland poet, lecturer, and fiction writer of the Reconstruction-era, was clearly not unaffected by the biological and social ideals of womanhood in the nineteenth century. In her first and only novel, *Iola Leroy*, the light-skinned Iola was deliberately fashioned after white womanhood in Harper's attempt to counter the debasement and denial of black women's virtue. The contemporary way to do this in the tradition of the plantation school was to hearken to the virtuous features and qualities of the southern white woman as they are outlined in the cult of True Womanhood. Modern criticism might be quick to point out the Anglo-centrism of upholding an image of whiteness-as-womanhood, but given the rhetorical strategies that were available to Harper at the time, using this trope was not an unusual or entirely ineffective approach. And yet Jennie Carter, as I will illustrate, never portrayed a black woman's worth in association with her skin tone. These limitations of the cult of True Womanhood affected Harper because she was writing in the East, and, as a light-skinned black woman herself, she needed to uphold certain tropes to preserve her respectability and elite standing in Maryland's black middle-class society. Carter, as we shall see, was still constrained by the transcontinental respectability discourse, but in necessarily different ways because of the demographics of the western black communities to whom she was speaking.

After an analysis of the major concerns and rhetorical approaches of Harper and other prominent Northern respectable black women, it becomes apparent that the standards of respectable black activism and the conditions upon which black women's voices were allowed into the public sphere were expressed by the following tropes on the East Coast: the "near-white" woman, the teacher, and the activist woman-of-letters. In order to represent an accessible black womanhood to broader late-century audiences, writers like Harper spun depictions of women that sought to close the divide between popular imaginary perceptions of white and black virtue. The "New Negro Woman" of the turn-of-the-century was constructed to publically stake a claim on the black community's place in social action and discourse.⁸

BLACK WOMEN LIVED IN THE EARLY WEST? A DEMOGRAPHIC PRIMER

Black women comprised less than one percent of all females living in the Pacific states until 1920, but in California in particular their demographics lent themselves to the creation of a distinct geographical locus of elite black middle-class womanhood.⁹ A majority of the black

population in the California Bay Area by 1860 were eastern transplants. In San Francisco, forty-one percent of the black population was originally from the northern and mid-Atlantic states, compared to the 37% who were from southern states.¹⁰ Lawrence de Graaf's examination of Census records revealed that black women living in California in the latter half of the century were more likely to be older, have few children, live in cities, and be literate. According to Willi Coleman, "in 1860, when the overwhelming majority of African Americans were illiterate, 74 percent of California's black female population could read and write... This high degree of literacy produced cultural tastes, social life, and a concern for education that collectively gave a majority of blacks in cities like San Francisco a middle-class upbringing by 1880."¹¹ These demographic characteristics notably distinguished black female populations of the West from those from the South. After the Civil War, the Census indicates that the "number of black women in western states" grew to the thousands and continued to increase over the second half of the nineteenth century.¹²

The presence of black middle-class women in the West would have a great influence on the region's history of intellectual and civil rights activism, a history that would be both chronicled and supported by the voices of the Pacific black press. "The earliest significant protests of black women took the form of individual law suits during the 1860s against the denial of civil rights," addressing issues like restricted or denied access to ride on streetcars and the right for blacks to testify in court against whites.¹³ Activist writing in the black press would come to parallel the motivations of the law suits of the 1860s as men and women negotiated the efficacy of effecting legal and social change through voice and through action.

CONSTRUCTING THE PUBLIC FACE OF RESPECTABILITY

"Let our young men adopt none of the vice of the Anglo-Saxon; our young women have all refinement of those around them, and the dear children every encouragement to study... We are on the eve of a glorious morning. May we awake every man adorned with true manliness—every women with gentleness..."¹⁴ With this statement, Carter encapsulated the relevance of public self-representation to the task of racial uplift in the West. Carter manipulated the popular archetypes of respectable nineteenth-century womanhood to create a public image for herself that cautiously toed the line between public and private action. An analysis of Carter's contributions to the *Elevator*, read against the established Eastern constructs, can reveal the primary modes of constructing respectability and creating a public self available to nineteenth-century black women. The rhetorical tropes that Carter most heavily relied on are those of the temperance activist, the teacher, and the activist woman-of-letters. An examination of these

archetypes can reveal Carter's thoughts on the efficacy of voice versus action in enacting the work of a respectable woman.

One mode of examining respectability, and its relationship to Eastern black icons and white models of propriety, was through Carter's representations of herself as a temperance activist. In one of the few investigations into African American relationships to the temperance movement, Denise Herd's essay, "The Paradox of Temperance: Blacks and the Alcohol Question in Nineteenth-Century America," tracks the concept of alcohol as an "enslaver" of man.¹⁵ In the antebellum period, Herd notes that there was "an overwhelming response in the free black population" to the "message of temperance," evidenced by the formation of successful mid-Atlantic organizations like the Colored American Temperance society in 1830s Philadelphia.¹⁶ Temperance, in turn, became connected to the cause of abolition and the more abstract "program of social betterment" that the movement's ideals of self-help and moral responsibility offered free blacks—"temperance activity was thus deemed important for gaining social respectability and improving the overall economic and social position of blacks."¹⁷ Carter upheld the value of sobriety for African Americans as a way of positively distinguishing the black community from the dominant community of white men. Associating whites with foolish drunkenness and blacks with sobriety and wit was one means of championing a public image of a morally and intellectually competent (if not superior) black identity. This was made all the more commanding by the gendered perspective of Carter's anecdote. This investment distinguished her among her western contemporaries and put her in a similar camp as that of Harper and the mid-Atlantic activists. For Carter, "racial rights" and "social uplift" were directly tied to the issue of temperance because of how sobriety could be used to frame the value of the black community against white incompetency and injustices.¹⁸

Furthermore, California black women's investments in education activism impacted the utility of their image of respectability as educators of children and professional teachers. The public face of the schoolmarm was closely tied to "the struggle of black women to overcome illiteracy and gain an education. This task was not as formidable in the West as in the South, for western black women had a markedly higher rate of literacy than did those in other regions.... [and] only 26 percent of black women in the West were classified" as illiterate in the 1860 census—elsewhere in nation illiteracy was the norm.¹⁹ Campaigns for educational reform and access to public schools were, therefore, a central concern for these literate, middle-class black women.

In the early 1850s, there were no state laws dictating the source of public school funding or "the inclusion of nonwhites," leaving most California communities with electively all-white schools. The campaign for access to

public schools in California was initiated in 1854 with the establishment of the first African American schools in the state in San Francisco and Sacramento, both cities where funding for "colored" schools was left entirely to private charity. In 1855 and 1856, the city school boards took over funding for "colored schools" and black women formed committees to raise additional money.²⁰ But the legal gesture toward the public funding of black schools by no means solved the issue of access.

The development of public school campaigns was well documented and buttressed by the black newspapers circulating in the 1860s. Women remained ardent players in the fight for black school children to receive the educational resources afforded to white students and, as we can see from Carter, they believed in the power of their voices to effect change. The legal segregation of California's public schools ended by 1890, and nearly a decade earlier in "most western states," through the efforts of legislation and law suits.²¹

Not only were black women in California activists for educational reform, but many in their ranks of the middle class were also professional teachers. De Graaf notes that "teachers comprised the elite of black working women, but their numbers were small in comparison to the total number employed outside the home."²² Working outside the home was, for most black women, a necessity despite their adherence to a Victorian ideal that exalted women's domestic role. The teacher, though, was situated in the ideal space to inhabit both the worlds of respectability (domesticity) and of necessity (paid labor). Other types of employment available to black women included domestic service, seamstress, cooking, hotel or boardinghouse keeping,²³ restaurant management, and real estate brokering.²⁴ But "black women who became teachers" succeeded far more than "other achievement-oriented black women" who "struggled to become nurses, doctors, journalists, and editors."²⁵ Carter, who claimed both the image of a former teacher and of a journalist, held a lion's share of the cultural capital afforded to black middle-class women.²⁶

Moreover, Carter used her column to mobilize community efforts in response to specific local political issues. How was speaking out publicly seen as an action that was or was not appropriate for black women? If the voting booth was not a woman's place, what was? She wrote, "Let each one bear in mind that any great enterprise by our people calls for united aid; and whether or not we each are assigned posts of honor, let us press on..."²⁷ If women lack the same "posts of honor" awarded to respectable black men, what is the black woman's call to duty? Carter, after all, reiterated one of the common beliefs of black activists of the time: that true black male suffrage and political rights had to be secured before "the women talk of their rights."²⁸ While Carter may have been willing to set the legal rights of women on the backburner, she was highly invested in the power of gendered activism (indeed,

her own) to incite political action and change. In one column, Carter took up the issue of unity over education reform in California: she says, “Mr. Editor, write, cease not, get the people in San Francisco to act, act as a unit. Organize!! Present a united front to the enemy. Let all mankind know we are in earnest and are not to [sic] lazy to progress.”²⁹

Jennie Carter’s columns illustrate how women’s voices were valued in a domestic context by translating this ideal, through the pages of the *Elevator*, into a valued public voice—in effect this allowed her to negotiate a space that was at once public/political and at the same time private/domestic. She says this of writing and the world of the woman-of-letters: “It is a ladylike employment—far better than small gossip, or contending for our political rights...”

CONCLUSIONS

Lawrence de Graaf, in his study of African American women in the West, observed, “However distinguished black women may have become, they received virtually no recognition for their accomplishments from whites.... Although black women in [California] had entered several professions, participated in civic and wartime activities, and had established numerous social organizations, [the *Who's Who among Women in California* published in 1922] does not mention a single black woman or group.”³⁰ Indeed, as early as Reconstruction, black female activists were speaking and writing not only for recognition in their community but to defend and legitimate the image of black womanhood and manhood to the nation at large. It would be more than half a century more before the white public would begin to give credit to the accomplishments of these African American pioneers as the “New Negroes” of the Harlem Renaissance, but the history of their activism, creativity, and intellectual flourishing goes back much further and exceeds many of the artificial geographic boundaries that are touted in the dominant narrative of post-Civil war black history. Although the tradition of representing respectability may have been less constrained in the West than it was in the East, the conditions of Reconstruction America were still dominated by the forces of racism and oppression that prevented black women from being recognized for their activism (or, indeed, from living with any more freedoms than those allowed to their eastern contemporaries). In the late nineteenth century,

respectability discourse was transmitted throughout the social and physical landscapes of the expanding nation, and it is important to remember that one way in which it traveled was through the voices of black women.

Tracking the movement of this activist tradition from its inception in the east to its permutations in California allows us to problematize the history of gender in the West. It provides, moreover, a springboard from which to complicate claims that the sociopolitical and gender history of the West was substantially different, or exceptional, in how it shaped sexed and gendered relations. Rather, when it came to the performance of black identity, the transcontinental dimension of nineteenth-century respectability discourse and the cult of True Womanhood overrode the differences in the multicultural class history of the West. It would seem as though the East Coast standards of respectability were imported along with the middle-class black families that headed out West. As Carter and her work illustrates, the most effective way for black women to engage in activism or achieve public power in the Reconstruction-era West was through this respectability discourse, whose origins can be found in the literary traditions of the North and South.

Activist, community-minded women like Carter resisted certain caricatured portrayals in much of the same way that eastern figures like Frances Harper pushed against portrayals of lower class blacks in the mid-Atlantic states. Carter was willing to accept the constraints that the cult of True Womanhood imposed on her voice and public behavior just as eastern women did.

Such a conclusion, however, only raises further questions. Might the powerful relics of the cult of True Womanhood continue to inform sex and gender in the West despite racial and class differences? What were the experiences of earlier eastern imports to California—might their experiences articulate a different discourse of womanhood? Moreover, can we find examples of women of color activists who were indigenous, rather than transplants, to the Rocky Mountain and Pacific states? How did this familiar, imported discourse about public women of color fit into the array of raced and gendered experiences in the Pacific West? Jennie Carter is just one of many women yet to be resurrected from the historical record whose cautiously formulated voice can expose the complex preconditions within which black women could enter the public sphere after the American Civil War.

NOTES

¹ Jennie Carter, “Letter to Mr. Trask, San Francisco, July 4, 1868,” *Elevator*, July 10, 1868: 1, in *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West*, ed. Eric Gardner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 40.

² Gardner, “Always Faithful: An Introduction,” in *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West*, xvii.

³ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 152.

⁴ Marilyn Richardson, “Introduction,” in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4–5.

⁵ Richardson, “Preface,” in *Maria W. Stewart*, xiv.

⁶ Richardson, "Essays and Speeches, 1831–33," in *Maria W. Stewart*, 25.

⁷ Ibid., 26–27.

⁸ "In 1890 [Harper] had been publicly designated as one of 'The Women of Our Race Worthy of Imitation.'" See Frances Smith Foster, "Introduction," in *Iola Leroy*, xxx.

⁹ Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850–1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (May, 1980): 286.

¹⁰ Willi Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development in California, 1848–1900," in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 101.

¹¹ Ibid., 102.

¹² Glenda Riley, "American Daughters: Black Women in the West," *The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 2 (Spring, 1988): 18. See also: Ralph Mann, "Peace without Prosperity, 1865–1863—Shared Values: Family Life and the Foreign Born," in *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California 1849–1870* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 107. Mann notes that "the census takers of 1860 proved reluctant to label a woman occupationally unless she lived alone or was the sole supporter of her family, and unless the occupation was socially acceptable..."

¹³ De Graaf, 292.

¹⁴ Carter, "Mistakes, *Letter from Nevada County*, Mud Hill, August 4th," *Elevator*, August 16, 1867: 3, in Gardner, 4.

¹⁵ Denise Herd, "The Paradox of Temperance: Blacks and the Alcohol Question in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*, ed. Susanna Barrows and Robin Room (Berkley: University of California Press, 1991), 354.

¹⁶ Ibid., 360.

¹⁷ Ibid., 363.

¹⁸ Ibid., 309. De Graaf notes, moreover, that "prohibition sentiment was strongest in rural areas of the West, where few black women lived. Most large cities were 'wet' strongholds, and black areas were close to establishments that depended on liquor."

¹⁹ Ibid., 293. See de Graaf's summarization of Census findings in footnote, 27.

²⁰ Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 109–110.

²¹ De Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 294.

²² Ibid., 296.

²³ Mary Ellen Pleasant was a famous boardinghouse keeper.

²⁴ The most famous real estate broker may have been Biddy Mason. Riley claims that "because of her charitable work she was called 'Grandmother' Mason," a point which gestures to the cultural capital of the maternal black women within black communities. See Glenda Riley, "American Daughters," 22.

²⁵ Riley, "American Daughters," 23.

²⁶ Coleman claims that "the overall tone set by the African American press in the West perpetuated an idealized version of women's place in society. In a style that was 'stuffy, moralistic, and Victorian,' female existence was tied to the domestic sphere," but he notes the *Elevator* as one publication in particular that was known for its relative liberalism. See Coleman, "African American Women and Community Development," 116–117.

²⁷ Gardner, 52.

²⁸ *Elevator* 5 November 1869: 2 Mud Hill, Oct. 27, 1869, in Gardner, 81.

²⁹ Gardner, 70.

³⁰ De Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region," 313.