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## Reading Race through U.S. Women's Biographies

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Reading Race through U.S. Women's Biographies*

Lois Brown. *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xiv + 690 p.; ill.; ISBN: 9780807831663 (alk. paper) 0807831662 (alk. paper).

Kimberley Mangun. *A Force for Change: Beatrice Morrow Cannady and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Oregon, 1912–1936*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2010. 344 p.; ill.; ISBN 978-0-87071-580-8 (pb).

Julia A. Stern. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. xv + 330p.; ISBN: 9780226773285 (cloth : alk. paper) 0226773280 (cloth : alk. paper) 9780226773315 (pbk.) 0226773310 (pb).

Lea VanderVelde. *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Book viii, 480 p., [6] p. of plates : ill., map, ports.; ISBN: 9780195366563 (alk. paper) 0195366565 (alk. paper).

Margaret Washington. *Sojourner Truth's America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Book xx, 478 p.: ill.; ISBN: 9780252034190 (cloth : alk. paper) 0252034198 (cloth : alk. paper).

#### **Alison M. Parker**

The understudied and underappreciated lives of Harriet Scott, Mary Chesnut, Sojourner Truth, Pauline Hopkins, and Beatrice Morrow Cannady provide rich details of their attempts to transform the nation and the eras in which they lived. Truth, Hopkins, and Cannady became reformers, pushing for full social and legal equality without distinctions based on race or gender. Whereas Truth used her voice and her body to call for change—for instance, by leading formerly enslaved refugees from the District of Columbia to safer homes in northern and western states after the Civil War—Hopkins and Cannady used their pens to advocate social and political equality for all. Harriet Scott arguably led a more private life, taking action in a more immediate way to ensure the freedom of herself and her daughters. Even after Dred and Harriet Scott became prominent because of their suits for their freedom, Harriet did not become a public abolitionist who spoke to the press or addressed local black church audiences or other reform communities. Yet Scott's action had great political

and legal consequences; the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857 decision made the unfree status of African Americans clear. The country's divisions over slavery and states' rights also affected the lives of white women, such as Mary Chesnut, a white slave mistress whose class- and race-based privileges were threatened by the disruptions of the Civil War.

These biographies highlight the difficulties involved in documenting the lives of women. In particular, enslaved black women rarely left direct firsthand accounts of their own experiences or ideas. It is therefore interesting that the best two biographies of those reviewed here are about illiterate enslaved women. In their biographies of Harriet Scott and Sojourner Truth, Lea VanderVelde and Margaret Washington knew that they did not have treasure troves of archival collections. Perhaps this motivated them to more creatively paint evocative descriptions of the era and place in which each woman lived and worked. Of the five biographers, VanderVelde overcame the greatest paucity of sources about her subject. In spite of this, she managed to create a compelling picture of how Scott likely thought and felt based on entirely circumstantial evidence.

VanderVelde's fascinating book, *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier*, captures the environments in which Harriet Scott lived her life and filed her suit for freedom in 1846 (it took eleven years before the U.S. Supreme Court decided the Scotts's legal case). VanderVelde had no choice but to write an unconventional biography: Harriet Scott was illiterate and left no written records of her own, although her name and a very brief outline of her history did appear in the court documents. Harriet contended she was free because she had lived for several years in Wisconsin territory and because her master, the local Indian Agent, had performed a marriage ceremony for Harriet and Dred Scott and allowed her to move in with him, leading her to believe she had been freed. In addition to these court documents, VanderVelde unearthed one newspaper article that quoted Harriet Scott directly. These are virtually the only direct accounts of Harriet Scott that VanderVelde had to work with.

It is impossible to write a standard biography based on such a dearth of primary source information. As VanderVelde notes, the Scotts's lives, like those of most subordinate people, were "erased by time and memory" (3). Recognizing this, VanderVelde chooses instead to write a gripping account of the places and era in which Harriet Scott lived. In particular, she uses what she calls an anthropological approach of "thick description" to provide a rich history of life in the northwest Wisconsin and Minnesota Indian frontier territory in the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>1</sup> VanderVelde vividly recreates Harriet's world. Starting with Scott's time on the frontier, VanderVelde is able to detail Scott's probable daily routine by mining the meticulously kept diaries and

letters of her white owner, the records of a local shopkeeper, and papers from a trading company to document the culture of life on the frontier.

In the process of recreating Harriet's everyday life, VanderVelde also links Scott as a witness to several momentous events in American history. For example, she was present at the Ojibwa treaty negotiations and signing of 1837, which took place at the fort under her master's direction, with thousands of Indians meeting there to represent their interests to the American government. VanderVelde's poignant accounts of the treachery of the American Fur Company and the U.S. government in their dealings with the Indians in the Northwest Territory provide an excellent comparative approach for her history of black enslavement.

VanderVelde argues that when the couple moved to St. Louis, Missouri in the 1840s, they experienced a shift in their status compared to their time on the frontier. In St. Louis, the Scotts became more marginalized and less accepted than they had been in Indian Territory. Now, based on their race, white Americans identified them as "other" and non-American. In 1846, when Dred Scott returned from two years of service to a white officer with the Army of Occupation on the Louisiana and Texas border, he brought with him enough money to buy his freedom. However, his owner, Mrs. Irene Sanford Emerson, refused. Within days, Dred and Harriet Scott filed two separate suits for their freedom. VanderVelde speculates that Harriet Scott filed separately because she believed she could clearly establish her freedom, thereby ensuring the freedom of her two daughters, whose condition followed that of the mother.

The last third of the book documents the increasingly hostile conditions for slaves pursuing freedom suits in Missouri, from the point when the Scotts first filed their petitions in 1846, until the Supreme Court's ultimate decision in 1857. VanderVelde explains why two seemingly straightforward freedom suits were ultimately denied—and in such a manner as to help precipitate the onset of the Civil War. VanderVelde cannot establish precisely how long the Scotts spent in jail, how they survived, and where their daughters were during the eleven years it took for the case to make its way through the courts. What she can tell us is that Harriet Scott lived twenty years of her life as a free woman and lived to see her grandchildren born free. As VanderVelde concludes, "[i]t is amazing what can happen when an individual comports herself as if she is indeed entitled to justice and holds fast to the possibility" (324). This informative book is well worth reading.

Unlike the other books under review, Julia A. Stern's *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic* is a work of literary criticism by an English professor. It deals with a white plantation mistress from South Carolina whose husband, James Chesnut Jr., became a leading figure in the Confederate military and

government during the Civil War. Chesnut's 1860s diary and her 1880 additions have been expertly edited and published by C. Vann Woodward and analyzed by historians such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.<sup>2</sup> Stern's purpose is instead to explore how Chesnut transformed her relatively short diary entries of the 1860s into what Stern describes as an "epic" text: "In a final burst of creative energy . . . the diarist of the 1860s fashioned herself into a literary writer, giving expression to the devastation of an entire society" (2). This decades-long process, Stern argues, allowed Chesnut to create an (unfinished) Civil War epic that sheds light on Confederate culture and society.

Historians might be most interested in Chesnut's ideas about slavery as well as in Stern's analysis of her 1880 literary work as a direct response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stern notes that Chesnut read and re-read Stowe's novel, critiquing the characters and situations as sentimental or unrealistic. Chesnut, a slave owner, had complicated feelings about the peculiar institution; her anger at white men's sexually predatory behavior toward enslaved black women informed her critique. As Stern explains it: "Chesnut laments the fact that Stowe has painted him [Simon Legree] as a bachelor; this strategy thus sanitized what otherwise might be a scathing portrait of the tendency of certain married masters to exploit their slave women sexually, producing mulatto offspring who look just like their fathers' other children, but who are doomed to serve as these men's slaves" (140).

In a final chapter entitled "Recognition: Looking Defeat in the Face," Stern analyzes an 1864 incident when a tattered and war-torn Chesnut returned alone to her hometown expecting the courtesy she usually received from the locals, only to find that without her finery and her servants, she was virtually unrecognizable. As Chesnut put it, "For the first time in my life, I was nobody" (261). With this, Chesnut captured the overwhelming sense of the white South in its defeat. Yet Stern argues that she remained resilient by "transforming the fragments of her Civil War diary into an epic work of art" (266). Stern's book is not a conventional biography and assumes a fair amount of familiarity with Chesnut's Civil War diaries. It focuses far more on literary analysis than on Chesnut's life, so it will likely interest literary scholars more than historians.

Lois Brown's biography, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*, explores the life of Pauline Hopkins (1859–1930), a free black native of Maine who spent most of her life in Boston, Massachusetts. As a young girl and woman, Hopkins performed in all-black choruses and acting troupes but launched a second career in the mid- to late-1890s as a public speaker and a writer of fiction and news articles addressing, in her words, "the wrongs of her race" (162). Just a few years later, Hopkins published her major historical novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro*

*Life North and South* (1900), as her contribution to black women's collective project of racial uplift at the turn of the century. As Hopkins explained in her preface: "Fiction is . . . a record of growth and development from generation to generation. *No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history*, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race" (177).<sup>3</sup>

Beyond Hopkins's published books and essays, and serialized fiction, which appeared in the *Colored American Magazine*, she left few personal records. This leads to unevenness in Brown's biography, which focuses heavily on Hopkins's life from 1900 to 1905, when she published *Contending Forces* and worked as an author and literary editor on the staff of the *Colored American Magazine*. Hopkins and her four male partners earned the enmity of Booker T. Washington and his allies, who attempted to take over the journal because they disapproved of its hard-hitting editorials against crimes such as lynching and articles in favor of an anti-colonial pan-Africanism. In 1904, the seemingly benevolent financial backing of the *Colored American Magazine* by white journalist and publisher John C. Freund led to his collaboration with Booker T. Washington in undermining the journal. Freund insisted the staff write only uplifting stories, something that Hopkins refused to do. As Brown explains, Hopkins's writings "created an uplifting record of African American achievement that could not be divorced from the history of racial violence and the history of disenfranchisement" (422). Freund forced the magazine to move from Boston to New York City and, most importantly, replaced Hopkins as the literary editor.

Perhaps because Brown has so few documents from other eras in Hopkins's life, she spends several long chapters discussing her fiction from the *Colored American* but devotes only one chapter to Hopkins's last twenty-five years. This is in part because, after Freund forced Hopkins out of her leadership role in the *Colored American*, she lived in obscurity until she died in 1930, alone and virtually forgotten. Only in the last chapter does Brown choose to discuss the problem of sources. A more deliberate and open consideration of the limits and possibilities of her sources would have enriched this book on Pauline Hopkins, an interesting and under-recognized woman.

Margaret Washington's *Sojourner Truth's America* is truly masterful. Like Lea VanderVelde's *Mrs. Dred Scott*, Washington's biography expertly captures the time and places in which Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) lived. As Washington explains: "This book attempts to unravel Sojourner Truth's world within the broader panorama of African American slavery and the nation's most significant reform era. The book offers a contemporary perspective on nineteenth-century American progressivism that places a black woman at the center of those stormy times" (4). Washington divides the



biography into three uneven parts that correspond to what she identifies as the most significant aspects of Truth's life history.

First, Washington discusses Sojourner Truth's enslavement in New York State. Born Isabella (Bell) Hardenbergh, Truth lived as a slave in a pro-slavery community of Dutch families in the Hudson River Valley. Truth's grandparents were West Africans who had survived the terrors of the Middle Passage; her mother shared with her some of their heritage, which Truth combined with the influence of Dutch Pietism to create her own evangelical spiritualism. Dutch customs "involved using black mothers as nurses and giving weaned enslaved toddlers to white progeny. . . . Bell's siblings were parceled out to Hardenbergh offspring by these methods," thereby breaking her family connections (22). After her first owner died, she was sold to a man who whipped her so severely that she had deep scars covering her back for the rest of her life; Truth sometimes revealed these scars in anti-slavery meetings to impress upon her audiences the horrors of slavery.

In the second part of her book, Washington explores how Truth used the legal system to emancipate herself and her son, Peter. She became a devout Methodist preacher, a believer in the spirits who saw herself as a special messenger of God. With the help of the New York Manumission Society, she took Peter's owners to court and successfully demanded his return from the South. After moving to New York City, Truth abandoned the Dutch language, learned English, and, as a member of the Magdalen Society, participated in risky missions rescuing female prostitutes in the worst neighborhoods of the city. Elijah Pierson, a white anti-slavery Perfectionist, headed the Magdalen Society and supported Truth's preaching. Truth lived as a domestic servant and a spiritual member of Pierson's "kingdom" on earth. Washington explains Truth's attraction to the "kingdom": "The spirits sat, ate, and worshipped in common, embracing a leveling that disregarded the larger society's racism and sexism. For Isabella, this Christian communalism with an egalitarian base was a satisfying life" (96). When a new "holy man" named "Father Matthias" created the Zion Hill commune, Pierson and his followers, including Truth, moved in. Like many other nineteenth-century Americans, Truth turned to communal living and utopian communitarianism several times in her life. In 1834, when this commune fell apart, Truth broke away from her fascination with what Washington terms "patriarchal Protestantism" and started a new phase of her life (126).

The third and largest section of Washington's biography is devoted to Sojourner Truth's life as an increasingly prominent public activist working for a wide number of reform causes. In her embrace of temperance, water cures, abolitionism, Spiritualism, women's rights, utopian communitarianism, and many other reforms, Truth epitomizes the enthusiasms and optimism about the possibility for transformative change in the middle

decades of the nineteenth century. In 1844, she joined "the most exceptional and progressive commune established during America's 'communitarian moment,'" the Northampton Association in Massachusetts (157). That year also marked her first public anti-slavery speech.

After President Lincoln issued the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, Truth received an official commission from the National Freedmen's Relief Association to minister to the many freedpeople who had fled to the nation's capitol and had settled in overcrowded, unsanitary refugee camps. In addition to raising funds and helping resettle them in other states, Truth circulated petitions in support of a bill to give freedpeople land in the western territories. For Truth, as Washington points out, "Land . . . was her people's entitlement and the key to their economic independence, industry, and mobility" (356).

Washington's book is an excellent rendering of Sojourner Truth's life. It captures her fascinating life story, her personality, spirituality, and dedication to an impressive array of reform causes. It places Truth at the center of a vibrant reform community of radicals and outsiders who managed to make causes like abolition, temperance, or women's rights seem more possible and even desirable over time. Washington's biography is well worth reading and sharing with others.

Kimberley Mangun introduces her readers to a less well-known figure, the Portland, Oregon, civil rights activist Beatrice Morrow Cannady. Mangun's book focuses on about twenty-five years of Cannady's life and work, when she was a writer, newspaper editor, lawyer, and civil rights activist, from 1912 to approximately 1936. Cannady's most notable contribution was her work as an editor and then publisher of *The Advocate*, a weekly paper for African Americans "founded by her first husband, Edward Cannady" (1). In 1932, she earned the distinction of being the first black woman in Oregon to run for the position of State Representative: "Ultimately, 7,668 voters did feel she was the right person for the demanding job. . . . [C]onsidering that there were just 1,243 Negroes of voting age living in Portland as of 1930, the results are impressive and proof of her standing in Portland" (189). Mangun, a professor of Communication, relies upon extant copies of *The Advocate* to understand who Beatrice Morrow Cannady was as an activist and an individual. Each chapter focuses on an aspect of Cannady's work, as reported in her own paper, such as her elegant and well-attended interracial teas, her speaking tours, or her campaigns against local screenings of the popular but virulently racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Mangun's biography of Beatrice Cannady adds to historical accounts of racial discrimination in Oregon, Washington, and California against Chinese and Japanese Americans by documenting the racism against Oregon's small African American minority. Mangun establishes that white Orego-



nians worked hard to institute a southern system of Jim Crow segregation in their western state. White supremacy ideology and violence reached its peak in Oregon with the introduction of the new Ku Klux Klan to the state in the 1920s. In spite of the real dangers involved, Cannady boldly and uncompromisingly protested all incursions of the Klan and all acts of violence and segregation by whites against African Americans. While Beatrice Morrow Cannady's life is indeed worth telling, her definitive biography is yet to be written.

Each of these biographies reaches out to readers in different ways; all are ambitious attempts to capture the lives of women who, with the exception of Chesnut, helped to improve their worlds by fighting for civil rights. Just as VanderVelde's *Mrs. Dred Scott* is an absorbing biography and history of Scott's time and era, so too is Margaret Washington's *Sojourner Truth's America* a captivating account of Sojourner Truth's life and times. Although Truth was also illiterate, she became a prominent activist, whose words were recorded by many sources. Not surprisingly, Washington's biography captures more of Truth's personality and thoughts than VanderVelde could ever do, given the lack of available sources. Sojourner Truth comes alive in these pages as a woman of great force and determination who transformed the brutal cruelties of slavery into a personal mission to enact change for herself and for other enslaved African Americans. Although Truth's story is well known, Washington's biography does an excellent job of revealing Truth in all her complexity. In contrast to these two richly evocative biographies, the studies of Pauline Hopkins and Beatrice Morrow Cannady are less inspired, although their biographical subjects are not. While these two biographies provide some interesting information and impressions, they leave the reader wanting to know more.

Unlike the other four books reviewed here, Julia Stern's study, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War Epic*, is not meant to be a biography. As an English professor, Stern engages more explicitly and purposefully in a literary analysis of Chesnut's autobiographically-oriented writings. In contrast to the other four biographies, this book is about a white woman. Of the five women whose life histories are under review, only Chesnut came from and married into a well-off and prominent slaveholding family, and one that is well-documented in American history and politics. Because she was a close friend of the Jefferson Davis family during the Civil War, her historical "importance" is undisputed and historians have studied her writings for many years. Whereas whiteness gave Chesnut access to privilege and power, blackness determined much of what Harriet Scott, Sojourner Truth, Pauline Hopkins, and Beatrice Cannady could be and become. As slaves and descendants of slaves, they lived in a country where race determined

the boundaries of citizenship and even of personhood. All four, however, refused to live according to societal limitations and pushed for reforms that would guarantee African Americans their full civil rights.

These biographies collectively suggest that both race and sex made a difference in these women's lives. For Chesnut, her race and class gave her money, leisure, slaves, and social prestige. However, restrictive southern gender conventions inhibited her from being the successful published writer she had ambitions to be. For the four black women, each experienced the double burden of racism and sexism, and each strove to free herself from legal and social restrictions based on race and gender while fighting for freedom and citizenship for African Americans. Together these biographies reveal the strength and versatility of Scott, Truth, Hopkins, and Cannady in the face of adversity. Determined to break the boundaries placed on black women, they consciously entered into public, political debates about legislative reform, public advocacy, and legal actions that could help them achieve their reform goals.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

<sup>2</sup>C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *In the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Emphasis in original.