



PROJECT MUSE®

Uncommon Women

Laffrado, Laura

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Laffrado, Laura.

Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writing.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/27816.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27816>

INTRODUCTION

“Without Any Resort to Amazonian Conventions”

Women, Writing, Representation

IN A BRIEF periodical piece, “Independence,” published in the *New York Ledger* on July 30, 1859, Sara Willis Parton, writing as Fanny Fern, viewed the nation’s July Fourth celebration through a gendered lens. Using rhetorical questions, Fern sketched restrictions governing public behavior of nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class women:

Can I go out of an evening without a hat at my side? Can I go out with one on my head without danger of a station-house? Can I clap my hands at some public speaker when I am nearly bursting with delight? Can I signify the contrary when my hair stands on end with vexation? Can I stand up in the cars “like a gentleman” without being immediately invited “to sit down”? Can I get into an omnibus without having my sixpence taken from my hand and given to the driver? Can I cross Broadway without having a policeman tackled to my helpless elbow? Can I go see anything *pleasant*, like an execution or a dissection? (Warren, *Ruth Hall* 314–15)

Ending her list of questions with whether she could be nominated for governor, senator, or president, Fern concluded, “Bah—you know I can’t. ‘Free!’ Humph!” Fern’s “Independence” simultaneously protests and consents to the entrenched nature of public behavioral restrictions for white middle-class women. The periodical piece’s apparent subject—that Independence Day in the United States disregards the

absence of female independence—enables Fern to disparage gendered cultural restrictions, implicitly invoking images of herself booing public lecturers, avidly observing dissections, and freely walking out alone at night. However, by offering no possibilities of Fern's actually performing these imagined disruptive acts, the piece suggests Fern's dependable compliance with current social arrangements. By 1859, the year this piece was written, Willis had scandalously and repeatedly transgressed normative middle-class gender assumptions through divorce and a sensationalistic career, and she had elicited public excoriation for unwomanly behavior as the author of the novel *Ruth Hall*.¹ Despite or perhaps because of those events, in "Independence" Fern constructs herself as a woman who at times may internally resist public constraints but who will always behave appropriately. The provocative American women under examination in *Uncommon Women: Gender and Representation in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writing* enact central features of Fern's text. All violate a presumptive normativity in their lives, writings, and self-representations while correspondingly and contradictorily aligning themselves with prevailing gendered assumptions.

Uncommon Women considers challenging female representations in diverse, highly readable, U.S. women's texts first published in the nineteenth century. Throughout this study, I consider women's autobiographical concealments in forms ranging from cross-dressing to pseudonymity to posturing. My discussion centers on texts of six white women—Sarah Kemble Knight, Sara Willis Parton ("Fanny Fern"), Louisa May Alcott, and S. Emma E. Edmonds, with lesser though still significant critical attention to Mary Livermore and Annie Turner Wittenmyer—and one Black woman, Harriet Jacobs.

I first examine the nineteenth-century publication of the eighteenth-century travel journal written by white middle-class Sarah Kemble Knight. Knight, a part-time scrivener and estate settler, chronicled her unconventional journey from Boston to New Haven and New York in the period 1704–5 to help settle a relative's estate. I next investigate the popular and controversial early periodical writing of Fanny Fern (the adopted persona of Sara Willis Parton). Willis, a white middle-class woman, began writing for literary papers in financial desperation after the sudden death of her husband and subsequent economic abandonment by her relatives. I then turn to Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a text partially derived from the journal that thirty-year-old Alcott kept during the six weeks she nursed wounded male soldiers in a Washington, DC, Civil War hospital. Next I consider *Nurse*

and Spy in the Union Army (1865), a sometimes fictive account of war service by S. Emma E. Edmonds, a white woman who successfully cross-dressed as a Union soldier. Edmonds's narrative is read against two later Civil War reminiscences by former women's war effort organizers—Mary Livermore's *My Story of the War* (1889) and Annie Turner Wittenmyer's *Under the Guns: A Woman's Reminiscences of the Civil War* (1895). My concluding chapter views these texts through the lens of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), African American Harriet Jacobs's account of her life in and after slavery.

All these texts complicate notions of self-writing and female agency. I consider generic forms, language, illustrations, and other textual apparatuses of these often daring life-writing texts and situate them in specific U.S. cultural/historical moments. For example, in their navigation of and commentary on female representations, the writers under discussion at times employ topics of androgyny, asexuality, and lesbianism. These issues appear in various forms in the texts, sometimes muted, sometimes plainly apparent. In all cases, individually and collectively, these uses form a commentary on the rigidity and inadequacy of heterosexual female constructions. I follow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's understanding of "the autobiographical" as "autobiographical acts of narration, situated in historical time and cultural places, deploy[ing] discourses of identity to organize acts of remembering that are directed to multiple addresses or readers" (*Interfaces* 11). These autobiographical texts indicate heightened attention to cultural pressures for women to organize their lives in accordance with dominant cultural scripts such as apolitical passivity, domesticity, heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. I make critically visible the ways in which these texts dispute restrictive constructions of the female, test boundaries of race and class, and anticipate conventional reaction to their disruptive discourses. At the same time, I maintain my awareness of these texts as autobiographical, historical, and literary documents reflective of American beliefs, practices, and values.

This study makes no claim to an overview of women's autobiographical writing in the nineteenth-century United States. Rather, I have carefully selected the white middle-class women writers and texts in this project in order to focus on women whose race and class markers located them conventionally in the normative ordering system. These women were, in effect, members of the same cultural subset, trained to adhere to conformist gendered models. This study discusses their texts separately and in relation to each other. At various

moments in their texts, these women clearly signal their awareness of conventional behaviors expected of them by the larger culture. In their rhetoric and appearance, these are women who would be identified as less disruptive. With class and race identities generally correspondent with prevailing assumptions, significant difficulties of female autobiographical writing emerge that are linked directly to white/male defined discourses of gender. These women who could be (under)read as compliant struggled to attempt narratives of female selfhood and autonomy. Their struggles mark the even more extensive obstacles to autobiographical writing confronted by women whose race, class, or sexuality marked them as more transgressive. The concluding fifth chapter of this study discusses one such female author and text—African American Harriet Jacobs and her autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I move from white women's autobiographical writing to Jacobs's foundational text in order to ensure that generalizations in previous chapters work across ethnic/racial lines. This conclusion also significantly extends the discussion in the rest of the book.

Taken together, these texts trace a trajectory of general improvement in representations by/of women from the Federalist period to the post-Civil War era. However, as my discussion will reveal, it would be an oversimplification to claim that this progress was necessarily linear. In order to illustrate various obstacles in this movement, I have selected a diversity of texts for consideration, and I also perform fresh readings or significant rereadings of these texts. For instance, I discuss once-well-known but now nearly forgotten women and texts, such as S. Emma E. Edmonds and her popular Civil War narrative concerning her life as a cross-dressing spy in the Union Army. Other women and their texts are considered in particular ways for the first time, such as Sarah Kemble Knight, whose eighteenth-century travel journal I read through the lens of the text's rarely examined nineteenth-century publication. While all chapters examine intersections of women and culture, two chapters specifically consider female gender construction and the Civil War. The variety of texts under discussion as well as the combination of my approaches to them underscores the mixed nature of women's developing cultural enfranchisement in the United States in the nineteenth century.

Though this book takes as its focus texts by women, my discussion includes men who edited, published, rejected, or reviewed these texts, such as Robert Bonner, Theodore Dwight, William Dean Howells, and Nathaniel Parker Willis. Additionally, my concentration on autobiographical prose incorporates a multiplicity of genres, such as

the hospital sketch, journal, periodical writing, slave narrative, travel narrative, and war memoir. I also examine related correspondence, editions, illustrations, introductions, and reviews. The cultural period under discussion includes the rise of interest in women's education and literacy, the beginning of the collapse of the slavocracy, the Civil War, and the post-Civil War era, among other historical/cultural moments.

While my discussion is very much informed by feminist criticism, my methodology supplements and extends feminist criticism's responses to these texts. The vital passion to uncover American women's writing of earlier periods has resulted in the welcome retrieval of a number of texts. However, many of these works, although recovered, have remained on the margins of literary considerations. I fill such gaps with an insistence on the primary nature of the texts in this study. I argue that these texts are compelling in their own right and are valuable for what they reveal and for the way they augment our knowledge of women and representation in the nineteenth-century United States. My collective discussions of autobiographical women's writing in this study, as well as my use of neglected texts and contexts, generate valuable attention for these works. These very readable American women's texts will engage the general reader as well as scholars and teachers.

The larger part of *Uncommon Women* considers conflicted attempts of white middle-class women to narrate female selfhood. These texts present women whom the culture initially classifies as known and safe as they behave against conventional expectations and narrate their deviations from normative assumptions, while simultaneously proclaiming their propriety. On the road on at night with a male guide, Sarah Kemble Knight nonetheless critically scrutinizes and condemns the behavior of other women as "rude [and] unmannerly" (Knight 91). Financially independent and professionally successful, Fanny Fern catalogs her conformity: "I like a man's arm to lean on. I like a man's counsel and advice. . . . I love babies too, and flowers, and all pretty and sweet things" ("One Sort of Woman" 1870). Traveling alone by steamboat and train on her way to nurse soldiers in a Civil War hospital, Louisa May Alcott describes herself as a "bashful individual," "quite ready to be a 'timid trembler,' if necessary" (Showalter 6, 9). Having lived, traveled, spied, and fought in battle disguised as a man, S. Emma E. Edmonds still names herself a "poor, cowardly, nervous, whining woman" (Edmonds 359). The contradictory female self-representations in these works illuminate vexed contours of

nineteenth-century U.S. women's autobiographical texts. Such contours signal the compulsory nature of prevailing cultural assumptions, suggesting what Rachel Adams in another context has termed the "tyranny of the normal" (553).²

THE TYRANNY OF THE NORMAL

Since its initial publication in 1966, Barbara Welter's groundbreaking work on nineteenth-century U.S. white women's culture and the ideology of "true womanhood" has been rightly complicated and nuanced by scholars.³ As Mary Kelley has written in a recent retrospective, "In revisiting Barbara Welter's influential paradigm thirty years after its publication, we learn that True Womanhood's impact, which was presumed to have been uniform and transparent, was instead as diverse and complicated as the lives of those for whom the ideology had been designed." Indeed, as Kelley argues, "instead of limiting impulses of self-determination, white women revised its tenets to serve expansive purposes" (Commentary 70). My project extends such scholarly revisions of the True Womanhood paradigm in order to further uncover and situate ways in which women diverged from conventional gender scripts and also wrote of their divergences, implicitly offering subversive alternative female models.

Nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class female scripts of behavior were more various than public representations would lead us to believe. To realize this, we need only think of white middle-class women whose biographical outlines survive. For example, Annie Fields, widow of James T. Fields, owner of the publishing house Ticknor and Fields, led an influential group of women writers and found happiness with partner Sarah Orne Jewett.⁴ Delia Bacon, public lecturer on historical subjects, moved to England to attempt to prove her controversial conviction that William Shakespeare did not write works attributed to him.⁵ Maria Mitchell, first female astronomer in the United States and discoverer of the comet of 1847, was awarded the first advanced degree given to a woman, was the first woman appointed to the Academy of Arts and Sciences, and was elected president of the American Association for the Advancement of Women. In violation of public female constructions, these women and many others were childless, intellectual, professional, radical, and unmarried.

However, in constructions relayed by the means of nineteenth-century U.S. representation—advertisements, illustrations, magazines,

newspapers, novels, poetry, sermons, songs, stories—gender scripts were starkly limited and typically unyieldingly rigid.⁶ For example, the article "British Philanthropy and American Slavery" in the March 1853 issue of *DeBow's Review*, the South's most widely circulated journal, praised an anonymous female contributor ("The author, though known to fame, prefers the discharge of domestic duties to the noisy applause of the world" ["British Philanthropy" 258]) whose work "asserted and maintained the dignity, the elevation, the beauty of female character in its relation to that of the male, in the present constitution of society, and without any resort to Amazonian conventions" [258]). The short story "The Nest at Home," written by Mrs. Joseph C. Neal and published in the February 1850 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular Northern journal, featured an illustration of a seated white woman, her hair in curls, her cap and dress trimmed with lace, and her arms (and, by implication, her worthy life) full of two sleeping infants (88).⁷ In his book *Rational Religion and Morals* (1852), Thomas Vaiden praised "woman's conduct" as "her best jewel" (916). Susan Jewett's story "How I Came to Be Spontaneous" (1858) praised a "most dutiful and loving daughter" as

a generous girl, full of disinterested notions about providing for the declining years of her parents, and the increasing demands of her young brothers and sisters, [who] resolved to consecrate her life to them, and after dismissing her lover, determined not to marry at all. [She] devoted herself most assiduously to the care of the household, and nobody knew how much she suffered, for she tried to be cheerful and to make others so. (271)

In these realms, women were compliant by cultural standards. The nature of their lives varied depending on the role in which they were cast. Sisters, daughters, loving mothers, or devoted wives, they were virtually interchangeable.

When behavior or appearance of women in fictive locations deviated from normative standards, aberrations were intentional. For instance, the manifest example of Zenobia, the childless, intellectual, unmarried woman in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, is constructed as vain, proud, and unsuccessfully competitive for male attention with the demure, submissive Priscilla. Zenobia's behavior leads to her suicide and to debasement of her corpse. Why would a woman in the United States wish to resemble her? In a sensationalized illustration of Maria Bickford's real-life prostitution and murder,

the circumstances of her death are fictionalized. Though in reality Bickford's throat was slit so severely that she was almost decapitated, the illustration instead depicts her as stabbed with her own bedpost. Bickford's gruesome murder could have been portrayed so as to invoke sympathetic audience horror for the tragic circumstances of her death. Instead, the illustration encourages censure of Bickford's putative violations of female purity by imagining the post of her (sexualized, unclean) bed as the murder weapon.⁸ What woman wouldn't recoil at her fate? In his 1853 *Life Scenes*, writer and playwright Francis Durivage mocks the "withered face, bearded lip, and sharp nose of the ancient spinster" who forces a young man to kiss her (235). In Durivage's construction, unmarried women exist on the margins of nature ("withered," "ancient"), gender ("bearded," "sharp"), and desire (the kiss "forced" from a young man). Who would wish to resemble this caricature? In an anonymous 1855 narrative, a woman who is "victim of society's mummeries, of society's frivolities, and of society's skeleton religion" dies damned to hell, leaving her orphaned child behind ("Which: the right, or the left?" 214). What woman wouldn't fear this end? These aberrations are creations of patriarchy. They serve as cautionary tales, as negative reinforcement of women constructed as normative.

In nineteenth-century U.S. culture, the dominant appearance and behavioral scripts promoted for women were narrow, limited, and nearly impossible to avoid. The women who best met these standards were fictions of the patriarchal gaze: fantasy illustrations or living women significantly modified by indoctrination, dependence, and repression. For women, cultural approbation of one's behavior was constructed as crucial. In private life, women who entered the historical record and women who did not were various and varied. In public models created by the machines of representation, little variety existed.

In his collection *The Farm and the Fireside* (1852), Episcopalian minister and editor John Lauris Blake reinforced constraints of women's social and cultural position:

Knowing what we do of the warm susceptibilities of the female heart, an irreligious woman seems to us almost a paradox—sometimes we have thought her a monster! Knowing also the high mission assigned to her by the Author of her being, we shudder at the very idea of her ever becoming recreant to the faith or the practice of the Christian. (221)

Nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class women were perpetually and precariously close to classification as perversions of the natural order. Any deviation from compulsory restrictive scripts could result in revulsion and denunciation.

Public women who violated behavioral strictures even in small ways received swift, gendered censure. Mary (Todd) Lincoln, widow of Abraham Lincoln, attempted to sell her fashionable clothes to raise money and was publicly labeled "an intensely vulgar woman," "dreadful," "avaricious," and "wanting in all the true instincts and delicacy which belong to worthy women" (Fleischner 310). Boston publisher and editor Joseph T. Buckingham excoriated women's public behavior in his collection *Specimens of Newspaper Literature* (1852): "Ladies in assemblies and public places, of the most exquisite forms, render themselves, by affectation and visible conceit, too odious to be looked at without disgust" (302). "A creature, who spends its whole time in dressing, prating, gaming, and gadding, is . . . nearly on a level with the monkey species" (302). An anonymous article ("from the pen of a distinguished citizen of South Carolina" [584]), "American Institutions," described Harriet Beecher Stowe (infamous in the South as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) as "that vulgar, ill-bred woman" ("American Institutions" 1853, 586). Reverend J. T. Barr, writing in *The Ladies' Repository* in June 1854, quoted the cautionary verse on the tombstone of Mary Ashford, "a farmer's daughter—beautiful in person, and possessing . . . an accomplished mind":

As a warning to female virtue
 And a humble monument to female chastity,
 This stone marks the grave of
 MARY ASHFORD,
 Who, in the 20th year of her age, having incautiously
 Repaired to a scene of amusement, without proper protection,
 Was shamefully violated and murdered. (260)

The night after she attended a ball, "the corpse of poor Mary, bearing marks of brutal violence, was discovered in a field" (260). Barr reduces Mary Ashford's rape and murder to "a warning to young females against frequenting places of public amusement" (260). All these women had been perceived as behaving disruptively in the public eye. In response, cultural agents condemned them in commentary employing gendered discourses of class ("intensely vulgar," "ill-bred"), appearance ("odious,"

“dressing, prating, gaming, and gadding”), and sexual purity (“female virtue,” “female chastity”).

Far too many egregious examples exist that demonstrate harsh response to women’s public deviations from the norm. With such reactions to small violations, surely the women under consideration in this book—whose partial refusals to comply were so much more extensive—should be unpublished and unheard of. Why did these American women and their nineteenth-century texts receive any attention at all? (Or, as one of my students asked thoughtfully and hesitantly, “But . . . shouldn’t, like, they have been killed?”).

WHY WEREN’T THESE WOMEN SILENCED?

The absence of extensive public condemnation of these women and their texts may be understood in several ways. Because gendered assumptions authorized a very restrictive range of female types, a woman’s salient identity markers served to cast her in a reductive, recognizable female model. Thus, the texts and motivations of women under consideration here would have been reduced to stereotypical creations of patriarchy. In this crude view, Sarah Kemble Knight would be regarded as a devoted cousin traveling to aid a relative, her charitable motive serving to diminish the very unusual autonomy of her journey. Fanny Fern would be seen as the desperate widowed mother forced to write for paid publication after she had exhausted socially respectable ways to feed her fatherless children. Louisa May Alcott would be read as the energetic Yankee daughter, a recognizable product of her parents’ abolitionist beliefs and New England’s well-known antislavery politics and activism. S. Emma E. Edmonds would be reduced to the imprudent patriot, a woman so motivated by love of her country that she dressed as a man in order to defend the Union. Harriet Jacobs would be the mother so selflessly devoted to her children that she preferred hardships of a seven-year Southern concealment near them rather than Northern freedom away from them. As a result of underreadings that classify them in less threatening roles, these women and their works would have been read as less disruptive. Further, irregularities of their lives and texts were novelties and so were more entertaining than alarming in their singularity.

This is not to suggest that these women were ever far from an oppressive silencing as a result of their behaviors and the texts that publicized such behaviors. The most evident sign of their hazardous

status is the uncommon nature of their texts: while other women may have traveled on dangerous, solitary journeys, cross-dressed as men, or remained concealed in a garret for seven years, few women at the time recorded such experiences. Additionally, each of these women was confronted with the fear or reality of physical assault and/or strong public censure. Cultural toleration of these women and their work was not fixed; a slight shift in appearance, behaviors, or writing could provoke hostility and violence. The texts under discussion in this study reflect awareness of such penalties and corresponding strategies to circumvent them.

Knight's female autonomy and assertive voice disrupted passive, domestic notions of the female. As she traveled in the woods at night with a hired male guide, Knight risked her chastity, reputation, and personal safety. When she wrote about these experiences and then circulated her text among family and friends, she extended her jeopardy further by publicizing such events. However, though the text's private circulation—with its limited, selected readership—could have authorized Knight to construct herself more disruptively, Knight aligned herself fervently with white middle-class mainstream discourse. Though the text provoked in its independent, woman-centered focus, its larger context was that of the recognizable, white middle-class woman behaving well. In salient, formulaic ways, Knight's journal resembled acceptable female middle-class discourse, consequently locating Knight herself within conventional parameters. As I discuss later in this introduction and then more closely in the first chapter, the 1825 publication of and response to Knight's eighteenth-century *Journal* reveals contours of a larger cultural discourse concerning gender and representation that informs publication of nineteenth-century U.S. women's texts.

Employing the persona "Fanny Fern" enabled Sara Willis Parton to adopt a range of roles in her early periodical writing—children, mothers, observers, and wives, among other personae. In these assumed identities, Fern sought reader understanding, working to persuade readers to view Fern through the lens of their own fears and desires. In other periodical pieces, Fern drew on topics and used tones that activated conjecture regarding her sex-gender identity. For example, Fern's writing about men, combined with her use of an authoritative manner that evoked male agency, prompted readers to assume that the author must also be male. In her early periodical writing, Fern is able to diversely portray individual female selves and to present an ambiguous sex-gender identity. Notwithstanding such stimulating

gendered variety in her writing, Fern's general alignment with customary notions of women protected her. My focus on Fern's critically neglected early periodical writing provides a fresh opportunity for consideration of the intersection of anonymity and women's autobiographical writing.

Before her fame as the author of *Little Women* and other books, Louisa May Alcott was a nurse in a Washington, DC, Civil War hospital. She subsequently wrote about the experience in *Hospital Sketches*, a narrative that uncovered autobiographic anxieties of her identity, sexuality, and gender. Some chapters of what later became *Hospital Sketches* were initially serialized in the Boston *Commonwealth*. Because of the *Commonwealth's* antislavery focus, the text's abolitionism worked to mute Alcott's sex-gender investigations. The success of these serialized sections resulted in arrangements to publish the sketches as a book—that is, to a larger and less self-selected audience. As a result, Alcott pragmatically added two new chapters to the text, which reordered her material and further diminished the text's sex-gender explorations. Indeed, over the years, Alcott continued to modify *Hospital Sketches* for increased conventionality and book sales: she allowed it to be bound with more overtly fictional stories which undercut the autobiographical nature of *Hospital Sketches*; and she censored various sections (“by taking out all Biblical allusions [regarding her criticism of a chaplain] . . . the book may be made ‘quite perfect,’ I am told. Anything to suit customers” [Myerson et al. 164]). Throughout her successful writing career, Alcott displayed anxious, heightened awareness of public expectations and scrutiny of her writing/self. In successive stages of her early work *Hospital Sketches*, Alcott decreased her rhetorical focus on sex-gender conflicts, resulting in a text—and an author—that could be read as more aligned with normative assumptions.

In S. Emma E. Edmonds's popular *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* (1865), readers were told that Edmonds had volunteered for the war effort and was hired to disguise herself as a male soldier and spy for the Union Army. In reality, Edmonds had disguised herself as a man, enlisted, and served as a soldier perceived as male until she was wounded. She fled the hospital in the middle of the night rather than be uncovered as female. Soon afterwards she wrote and published her successful narrative. Twenty years after the publication of *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, Edmonds publicly revealed her past identity, exposing the narrative deception that her wartime employment had been based on the perception that she was a man and not, as her text had maintained, a woman. Edmonds's declaring the truth of her war-

time cross-dressing was prompted by her desire to receive a military pension and to have her desertion charge dismissed. Two decades earlier, sex-gender assumptions had led Edmonds to flee the Army and to excise her passing as a male from her narrative rather than have it exposed. Twenty years later, when she revealed her former male identity, the resulting publicity marked such cross-gender impersonation as unusual, but, by the 1880s, it was titillating and newsworthy rather than sharply disturbing. Edmonds's delaying announcement of her autobiographical truths until such a disclosure was, to some degree, culturally allowable protected her from a public response that in her words would have been "far worse than death" (Fladeland 455).

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs related the decision of her autobiographic persona, "Linda Brent," to have sex with Mr. Sands, a white man whose protection would then secure her from the persistent, aggressive sexual demands of another white man. These sections of Jacobs's narrative disquietingly signaled female sexual knowledge and agency ("I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" [46]), subjects prohibited by cultural scripts of female chastity and passivity. Furthermore, Jacobs's naming of Black female/white male sexual intercourse disrupted multiple taboos regarding sexual desire, interracial sex, and rape. However, in other salient parts of the text, Jacobs repeatedly foregrounded the nineteenth-century construction of devoted motherhood, aligning herself with white female readers. Additionally, well-known white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child's agreement to serve as editor of and write an introduction to Jacobs's *Incidents* authorized a reading of Jacobs as upright, submissive, and remorseful.

Notwithstanding these suppressions, editings, misreadings, and silencings, Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs enacted the autobiographic in their texts through a mix of generic and rhetorical strategies such as the use of conventional discourse, alignment with female scripts, textual revisions, and adoption of fictive personae, among other methods. Such strategies enabled them to negotiate entrenched normative restrictions in their writing, eliding extensive censure.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICS

Particular generic spaces adapted by Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs for purposes of self-representation reveal and contest

confining female roles. Knight's generic locations of self-invention include the journal, travel narrative, and humor writing. Fern employs periodical writing to address topical subjects as well as self-construction. Alcott mixes the hospital sketch, journal, and travel narrative. Edmonds moves from the autobiography to the war narrative to the fictive. Jacobs combines the slave narrative and elements of the fallen woman narrative. As with all women engaged in autobiographical practices, Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs negotiate a complex web of gender and genre constructions in their attempts to locate a momentary coherence of self. Chapters in this book discuss each female writer's choice of a particular genre or genres, as well as what was gained or lost through adopting such forms.

Leigh Gilmore has suggested that at times women write autobiographically in other genres; that is, women may write autobiographically when not writing autobiography. Gilmore names this generic space "autobiographics," using the term to

describe those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine or the literary history or concept of the book which defines autobiography as a genre; instead, autobiographics marks a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography, namely those legalistic, literary, cultural, and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced. (185)

For Gilmore, engaging autobiographical strategies when working in forms that do not fundamentally require "a stable *I* anchored within a relatively stable genre" (185) provides space for women's autobiographical practices while evading more trenchant obstacles and narrower possibilities for self-representation of female autobiography. I extend Gilmore's arguments by demonstrating U.S. women's continuing multiple generic adaptations and female narratives of identity. These women expanded Gilmore's claims by adapting forms such as essay collection, historical account, hospital sketch, journal, periodical writing, slave narrative, and travel narrative for their autobiographical practices.

This is, of course, not to suggest that these women and their texts share what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have termed a comprehensive "relationality" (*Women, Autobiography, Theory* 37)—that is, one common female identity or experience that transcends form. As

Felicity Nussbaum has cautioned, "thinking about . . . the spoken and unspoken commonplaces [women] share must be grounded, I think, in particular and local instances of history if we are to avoid the generalizations that contribute to oppression based on gender" (148). The representational projects I examine are separated by differences of the women's subject positions and experiences. Their self-narratives emerge from varied backgrounds of scrivener, daughter, mother, and wife (Knight); middle-class widow and mother (Fern); abolitionist daughter (Alcott); patriot (Edmonds); and slave, daughter, and mother (Jacobs). Additionally, these women and their texts were not equally well-known. Large segments of the culture remained (un)aware of some of these women and their texts.

These texts are also separated by differences of the women writers' regional affiliations and professions, among other divergences. Their geographic locations are as various as eighteenth-century Boston; nineteenth-century New York and Boston; the Washington, DC, Civil War hospital; Northern and Southern Civil War battlefields; and the slave state of North Carolina. The women writers' sometimes temporary professions (estate settler, literary-paper columnist, war nurse, soldier, nursemaid), however diverse, determine their generic choices (hospital sketch, periodical writing, slave narrative, travel journal, and war narrative, among others).

However, these differences are not absolute. For all these women and their texts, the middle-class white United States and public representations of women served as dominant cultural centers. Notwithstanding their variations, each woman writer's autobiographical practices confronted and navigated the larger ordering system. These unconventional women shared the historically difficult position of women writing in cultures that to significant degrees resisted female autonomy and agency. The act of subject formation necessarily created conflicted female discourses of identity and independence. The resulting texts were complicated by gendered issues of representation and voice. In this way, as Felicity Nussbaum valuably puts it, "cultural constructions of self and gender intermingle with the individual subject's interest and engagement in taking up the particular discourses available at given historical moments" (149).

The texts under discussion all made initial print appearances in the broader nineteenth-century United States. During the latter part of this period, the national discourse concerning the U.S. Civil War contained issues also seen in women's texts studied here—that is, vexed conflicts of identity, representation, and boundaries. The central cultural

debates in political disputes regarding the war, and the publication and popularity of women's autobiographic texts all indicate fractures within the evolving normative ordering system. This study is not limited to the period of the U.S. Civil War, nor is the Civil War the organizing principle. However, as a necessary part of my desire to locate this project in the period of the broader nineteenth-century United States, a significant portion of its discussion occurs in the context of the Civil War era.

In the early 1860s, autobiographical texts by Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs shared the same cultural moment. Knight's *Journal*, which had emerged as a public text in the nineteenth-century United States, was reprinted in 1865; Fern's periodical writings were appearing regularly in the *New York Ledger* in 1865; Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* was published in 1863; Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy* was published in 1865; and Jacobs's *Incidents* was published in 1861. The historical period that Knight had documented in her journal was the focus of new interest. Fern's essays continued to draw a wide readership. Edmonds's account of her war experiences was sold and read by Northerners devoted to the Union cause. Jacobs's narrative attracted a white Northern female reading audience. As the Civil War fragmented and threatened to destroy the nation, these uncommon women's life narrations which challenged restrictive female representations, put pressure on race and class boundaries, and considered conformist responses to their disruptive autobiographical practices, were—tellingly, as I will argue most specifically in chapters 3 and 4—part of the nation's common literary discourse.

In general, anxieties of identity and autonomy seen in these texts— anxieties emerging from a range of cultural locations—tested constraints of social and political arrangements. The women's works under consideration here exposed oppressions that complicated women's life writing as their representations signaled restrictive gender conventions of the dominant culture. In temporarily coherent moments of selfhood, these texts reflected complexities of female positioning. As they attempted to declare the "I" in their various writings, Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs expanded female possibilities for U.S. women and positioned readers to consider other forms of repressive social insistence.

Uncommon Women begins with Knight's eighteenth-century *Journal* principally because of the work's provocative position as an autobiographical text written by a woman in the early eighteenth century and then published for the first time in the nineteenth century. In

chapter 1, "A More Masculine Courage': Women's Voice and the Nineteenth-Century Publication of Sarah Kemble Knight's *Journal*," I consider why the text—unconventional as it is—would be published and then multiply republished in the nineteenth century. I then examine how publications of Knight's text intersect with publication of other women's writing at the time. The *Journal*, though privately circulated by Knight, remained unpublished until 1825, nearly a full century after her death. The 1825 publication of the *Journal*—its original public issuing—has been almost entirely neglected in the critical record, as have the *Journal*'s subsequent republications later in the nineteenth century. I perform a fresh reading of Knight's text, situating it in the context of its nineteenth-century print appearances. I argue that the publication context of the *Journal* is a sign of a nascent receptivity to women's writing, a receptivity also seen in publication of women's texts that, unlike Knight's *Journal*, were both written and published in the nineteenth century.

Though Knight's text may have influenced other authors whom I discuss here, I have no evidence of that. I make no claim that Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, Livermore, Wittenmyer or Jacobs read Knight's *Journal*. However, the 1825 publication of the journal signals its participation in an emergent national debate concerning gender and representation. That is, the nineteenth-century revival of Knight's *Journal* informs publication of women's texts that, unlike Knight's, were both written and published in the nineteenth century. That this book begins with Knight's *Journal* invites speculation about the testing of this unstable gendered ground. An examination of Knight's text suggests a context for the discourse of this moment and informs the nineteenth-century U.S. women's texts later discussed in this book.

Knight, a woman visibly disrupting gender assumptions by traveling alone, paradoxically represents herself as promoting culturally sanctioned female scripts. Her choice of the journal enables her to record her autonomous travels and, despite the unorthodox nature of her journey, to construct a conventionally gendered self. In spaces between the independence of her journey and that constructed self, discourses of truth and identity emerge. For instance, left behind in the woods by her guide at night, Knight rejects conventional reliance on piety and instead voices and genders her fears: "Now Returned my distressed apprehensions of the place where I was . . . encompassed with Terrifying darkness enough to startle a more Masculine courage" (93). Emerging from her frightening hilly climb, she locates gendered images of reassurance:

But being got to the Top, was there amply recompenced with the friendly Appearance of the Kind Conductress of the night. . . . The Raptures which the Sight of that fair Planett produced in mee, caus'd mee, for the Moment, to forgett my present wearyness and past toils; and Inspir'd me for most of the remaining way with very divirting tho'ts, some of which, with the other Occurances of the day, I reserved to note down when I should come to my Stage. (93)

Ahead of her time in embarking on and recording such a journey, Knight afterward circulated her journal privately. The journal remained in manuscript form until 1825, when Theodore Dwight, Jr., anonymously edited and published it. The publication of Knight's unconventional *Journal* in the nineteenth century compels our notice as it points new attention to representations of and texts by women.

Reading against the first chapter's concern with a somewhat private woman-centered genre and voice, chapter 2, "Everything by Turns and Nothing Long': Configurations of Female Selfhood in Fanny Fern's Early Periodical Writing," explores popular form and gender flexibility. I examine texts from Fern's periodical writing beginning in 1851, when her work was first published, until 1854. During this time, as she wrote anonymously as Fanny Fern, Sara Willis Parton's identity was a well-kept secret. In 1854, Willis interrupted her periodical writing to compose her first novel, *Ruth Hall*; its publication led to the revealing of her identity. Thus, once she resumed periodical writing, her use of fictive female personae was necessarily transparent. For Willis, writing as Fanny Fern, a columnist whose "true" identity is the subject of heightened public conjecture, gender and public voice intersect in her early periodical writing, encouraging her to adopt multiple self-representations. I am interested in Willis's early periodical pieces—written before her public exposure as "Fanny Fern"—which employ strategies of female representation. My study conducts a significant reading of Fern's critically neglected early periodical writing and considers a mix of these early writings to uncover links between the weekly appearance of an author's work—its anticipated, recognizable form and voice—and her self-redefinitions. The chapter extends examination of autobiography's limited possibilities for self-interpretation. Autobiography's generic confines appear even more restrictive when compared to the periodical piece's extension of the process of self-representation, which emerges rhetorically from Fern's engagement with fictive stories of selfhood.

Chapter 3, "How Could You Leave Me Alone When the Room Was Full of Men!': Gender and Self-Representation in Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*," focuses on ways in which generic choice freed Alcott in *Hospital Sketches* (1863) to write about male/female physical contact without invoking male and female sexuality for herself or her nineteenth-century U.S. readership. The chapter explores how Alcott's use of the hospital sketch and her construction of herself as Civil War nurse Tribulation Periwinkle evades issues of sexuality, allowing her, within the permeable fictive/autobiographical boundaries of her text, to invent an alternative sex-gender identity for a white middle-class woman in the nineteenth-century United States. For example, discussing her loss of hair due to illness, Trib partially scripts female hair loss as wartime sacrifice, not unlike a wound incurred as a result of her service for her country: "I take some satisfaction in the thought that, if I could not lay my head on the altar of my country, I have my hair" (61). Such moments also allow for Alcott's use of subversive humor. Within the divided national space, elements of the professionalization of nursing and the transformation of the sex-gender system met in the temporary wartime hospital. These cultural changes combined with Alcott's nurse/soldier/mother self-definitions to invite reconfiguration of possibilities of her gendered identity. Readers of *Hospital Sketches* were thus able temporarily to imagine thoughts and behaviors beyond customary gender constraints. Alcott's experiential and literary journey outside her white middle-class location led to the Civil War hospital, as well as to nineteenth-century U.S. boundaries of gender, race, and nation.

Chapter 4, "I Am Other than My Appearance Indicates': Sex-Gender Representation in Women's Nineteenth-Century Civil War Reminiscences," extends the discussion of Alcott's invention of an alternative sex/gender identity, begun in chapter 3, by turning to Civil War reminiscences by S. Emma E. Edmonds, Mary Livermore, and Annie Turner Wittenmyer; these works record the experiences of women who disguised themselves as male soldiers. The chapter begins with a discussion of cross-dressing, gender construction, and authenticity in nineteenth-century U.S. Civil War narratives. I then historicize these works in the context of nineteenth-century sexology's attempts to order, contain, and stabilize ambiguous and contradictory sex-gender constructions. The "Publisher's Notice" which introduces readers to *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* foregrounds Edmonds's agency: "In the 'Secret Service' as a 'Spy,' which is one of the most hazardous

positions in the army—she penetrated the enemy's lines . . . no less than eleven times; always with complete success and without detection" (5). At the same time, the notice responds to the disruption of a woman passing as a man: "Should any of her readers object to some of her disguises, it may be sufficient to remind them it was from the purest motives and most praiseworthy patriotism, that she laid aside, for a time, her own costume, and assumed that of the opposite sex" (6).

Such narratives were written by women on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line during and after the war. These texts have subsequently provoked gendered questions of realism and historical accuracy. By selecting the Civil War narrative, women writers privilege a nationalistic, subjective accounting of U.S. history. In the larger context of chronicling women's war efforts, Edmonds details wartime self-representations that cross boundaries of gender and race. These cross-gender impersonations, for the most part assumed during her employment as a Union spy, would be read as shockingly wrong were they situated outside the narrative of wartime patriotism. In their recordings of Civil War history, Livermore and Wittenmyer, self-defined conventional women, discover desire and ambivalence in their conflicted responses to encounters with wartime women who had tested gendered confines.

The conclusion, "I Found It Hard to Preserve My Self-Control': Race, Women, Representation," discusses Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs's *Incidents* offers compelling documentation that autobiographic writing is even more difficult for women whose race, class, or sexuality marks them as multiply transgressive. This final chapter extends the discussion of previous chapters and examines how generalizations developed in those chapters are maintained across ethnic/racial lines. I conclude with Jacobs's text primarily because of its position as "the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation" (Carby 47). Jacobs's *Incidents* has certainly garnered more critical response than any of the other texts discussed in this book. In my evaluation of the main Black female autobiographical text of the nineteenth-century United States beside other, lesser-known white women's autobiographical texts, previously less visible privileges of whiteness emerge. Such analysis is valuable to this book as it exposes possibilities of access and authority granted to and unnoticed by nineteenth-century middle-class white women in the United States. Viewed through the lens of Jacobs's text, whiteness is foregrounded as the default race in Knight's, Fern's, Alcott's, Edmonds's,

Livermore's, and Wittenmyer's texts. A consideration of Jacobs's *Incidents* with these texts clearly uncovers unexamined assumptions of those perceived as white, as we recognize Jacobs's awareness that she is at all times identified as Black.

Gendered representations in American women's autobiographical work considered in *Uncommon Women* mark recognition of cultural pressures for women whose actions resulted in increased female visibility to identify themselves as conventional women. They also reflect the women writers' own conflicted struggles to declare a momentary coherence of self within genres that do not fundamentally require "a stable *I* anchored within a relatively stable genre" (Gilmore 185). In these (partially) successful displays of self-presence, these women, through their endeavors, articulated the complexity of female positioning. By engaging in these attempts at self-definition, Knight, Fern, Alcott, Edmonds, and Jacobs extended available female representations for all women. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that women's "narratives of self-discovery" authorize readers to "claim kinship in a literature of possibility. Most centrally, women reading other women's autobiographical writings have experienced them as 'mirrors' of their own unvoiced aspirations" (Introduction, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* 5). The multiple forms of difference engendered in these texts make their individual and collective participation in female self-representation particularly worthy of study and valuable for other women. The critical recovery of and attention to these women's autobiographical texts adds them to our increasingly nuanced understandings of autobiographical practices of white women writers and their negotiations of nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class culture. Overall, in *Uncommon Women*, women's autobiographical texts are presented as central and vital participants in evolving representations of women in the nineteenth-century United States.

