CHAPTER TWO

“That my work may speak well for Spelman”

Messengers Recording History and Performing Uplift

“I am not going this way again. I must say what I have to say now.”
—Emma DeLamotta, Spelman Messenger, November 1903

“We know where we’re going, and we know where we’ve been.”
—Student Performer, Spelman Founders Day, April 2011

Fostering Community Connections

This chapter revisits connections linking a curriculum development initiative funded primarily by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), subsequent research I’ve done to extend my scholarship and teaching around one of that project’s key themes, and ways in which both those endeavors (in the archive and in the classroom) have benefited from collegial, cross-racial support. Readers will find many examples here of previously published research that has supported my own. But in this case, I will also highlight the personal guidance of two mentors—a schoolteacher and an archivist. Their contributions to this chapter, each illustrating multiple strategies for collaborative leadership, represent the kind of “behind-the-scenes” support for shared narrative knowledge-making that, far too often, goes under-acknowledged. So, here at the start, let me salute Deborah Mitchell and Taronda Spencer, who together, as servant leaders enacting sustained Spelman traditions, led me to relate what we can learn in the archives to the ongoing project of nurturing future educational leaders, learners, and citizens.

I begin with a memory of Deborah’s classroom. In the spring of 2001, I drove from the northern suburbs of Atlanta, through the heavy traffic on
our city’s skyscraper-lined downtown “connector” of I-75/I-85, to Slater Elementary School. I had a late-afternoon appointment with Deborah, an inspirational elementary school teacher and participant in the multi-year humanities project, Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC). I could hardly wait to reach Deborah’s school: I knew she’d have stories to tell about an artifacts-and-family-history project her young students were completing. The previous summer, during an institute on the Kennesaw State campus near Marietta, Georgia, Deborah had taken on a leadership role for one of the project’s curriculum-building teams. She had been a pivotal voice in identifying the particular local topic we’d begun exploring under the umbrella of one of our KCAC themes, “Educating for Citizenship.” A proud graduate of Spelman, Deborah had urged us to dig into the college’s archive.

Over the years, she had learned much about the institution’s founding. She easily invoked stories of how students, teachers, and members of Atlanta’s black pastoral network overcame economic, political, and ideological challenges to launch what evolved into the women’s college of today. These affirming narratives circulate continually among Spelman community members, but they had also come to her through cross-generational family accounts. However, Deborah had not, at that point, fully investigated Spelman’s early history in a more formal “academic” way. Like many a K-12 educator, she had been constrained time-wise from such work, but this NEH-funded project brought opportunities for collaborative scholarship. From the outset, one KCAC project aim was to explore how having K-12 educators actually do interdisciplinary inquiry would make it easier for them to teach such processes to students. An important related premise was the idea that community-based research topics would matter to learners. With this context in mind, Deborah had suggested that having one teacher-scholar team focus on Spelman would produce resources of value to many US classrooms. This chapter, accordingly, grows out of place-based inquiry initially carried out by a group of educators who themselves crossed cultures of disciplinary training, race, teaching “level” (elementary through university), and neighborhood in a sprawling metropolitan area. My writing here about Spelman students’ and others’ longstanding engagement with its history has been seeded and nurtured with the wisdom and energy of team members involved in that project, which originated well over a decade ago.

“Educating for Citizenship” was one of several themes identified by the core group of K-12 teachers who had helped write our proposal to NEH.
This particular topic resonated powerfully for our team members. Living in a metro area so closely associated with questions about access to civic participation—Atlanta, after all, being home to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders—our region was also facing intensely debated questions about citizenship for an exploding immigrant population. “Educating for Citizenship” was a topic rooted in Atlanta’s past and highly relevant for our own time.

KCAC’s structure called for each subgroup of teachers to spend much of our first summer, as well as the following academic year, in interdisciplinary inquiry around one of our community-focused themes. For our original proposal to NEH, we had chosen community studies themes we hoped could be adapted to any US region. Besides “Educating for Citizenship,” we adopted these other topics, with our own local applications for each: “Reclaiming Displaced Heritages” (for us in Georgia, the Cherokee Removal); “Cultivating Homelands” (studying early twentieth-century rural life in our area); “Building Cities” (an examination of Atlanta’s transformation to an international city); and “Shifting Landscapes, Converging Peoples” (suburban life in our own time). Deborah’s advocacy of Spelman’s learning legacy as a local application for the “Educating for Citizenship” theme was especially promising for its transportability. How racial identity has interacted with debates about appropriate learning agendas, how women might serve as leaders in educational movements, how teaching enterprises forging new paths can best gather community support, and how a specific institutional vision can best interact with larger issues of social justice—these were just a few of the questions we began to investigate together, through the lens of Spelman’s archive.

By 2001, as KCAC-affiliated classes across metro Atlanta (including mine at Kennesaw State) studied Spelman’s founding era, we were all asking related questions about our own institutions’ histories and current values. For many of our students, whatever their grade level, this was their first experience engaging directly with archival materials, so we were tracking what most attracted their interest, and how. One learning legacy to emerge for classroom teaching was in the Spelman Messenger, which started publishing early in the college’s life. Experimenting with that resource, Journalism and American Studies teacher Dave Winter of Grady High School had begun using Spelman student-writers’ texts to engage his classes in interdisciplinary inquiry of their own. Thus, I arrived at Slater Elementary eager for dialogue about classroom projects linked to archival research—in this case, in an elementary school. Deborah’s students, like
Dave’s and mine, had been inspired by reading the Spelman Messenger to dig into other archives, including personal and familial ones.

Our access to the Messenger’s pages had come through the gifted, hard-working archivist who had become an unofficial member of the KCAC project—Taronda Spencer. From the very first visit we’d made to the Spelman archive, Taronda had welcomed us. She embraced our program as an avenue for disseminating knowledge about the college’s past to new audiences. She worked alongside the “Educating for Citizenship” group on Spelman’s campus. She came to Kennesaw State the next summer to lead a workshop on archival research. Across many years after the KCAC project’s funded phase ended, she mentored my own follow-up research at the college; read drafts of my writing; invited me to Founders Day; and hosted my participation there. This chapter’s analysis of counter-narratives emerging from Spelman in its early days, and continuing today, was possible to develop only because Taronda, along with other Spelman alumnae like Deborah, took on the role of guide. As I typed out this chapter years later, in what grammarians would call a first-person voice, my words came from prior collaboration, with each of my colleagues enabling this process in different ways. So my “speaking” voice here is actually a plural one, supported indirectly by their affiliation with a broader network of alumnae that safeguards Spelman’s learning legacies. My readers will find other signs of collaboration undergirding this chapter’s story woven throughout its endnotes, which, besides traditional citations, also include comments from generous African American women scholars who have read and responded to drafts. In making visible some of the personal interactions that gradually deepened my own commitment to Spelman’s legacy-making stories, I hope to demonstrate how multifaceted collaborations can enrich archival research as well as community network-building today. In particular, to highlight how stakeholders’ engagement with archives from Spelman’s past enables active learning and social action in our own time, this chapter addresses multiple counter-narratives. These include texts created by Spelman’s founders and their students, as well as more recent storytelling enabled by those artifacts to help today’s community at the college connect to that heritage.

Making History through Collaboration

On Wednesday, April 11, 1888, students, teachers, and alumnae gathered in one of Spelman Seminary’s sunlit new buildings to commemorate the
school's founding, seven years before, in the basement of Atlanta's Friendship Baptist Church. There was much to celebrate, including enrollment growth, steady increases in funding from loyal supporters, and the advancement to seminary status. But nostalgia for the early days reigned as well. And proud former students led that retrospective storytelling.

We can participate vicariously in that springtime occasion—foreshadowing the annual Founders Day event at the college in our own time—because writers for the school's thriving periodical, the *Spelman Messenger*, recorded it in front-page anecdotes from founding students such as Emma DeLamotta and Mary Ann Brooks. Their accounts brim with details about their inaugural 1881 classes—a time of both trials and vision-shaping. Thus, in her recollection, DeLamotta “told of her years of prayer that God would sometime give her the opportunity to go to school and learn to read her Bible.” She recounted how “with joy she hailed the coming of Miss [Sophia] Packard and Miss [Harriet] Giles as God’s own messengers to her.” In praising the arrival of the northern teachers who collaborated with minister Frank Quarles to open “their little school in the basement of Friendship church,” DeLamotta affirmed the role that she and other first-generation students played in establishing what would become Spelman: “She studied with all her might when it was light enough to see the letters; the basement was but dimly lighted at best, and in cloudy weather it was often too dark to study; but it was never too dark to pray.” Echoing DeLamotta, other speakers all confirmed their original determination “to make their future lives useful . . . and by their works to prove their gratitude for their privileges at Spelman” (“Spelman’s Birthday,” May 1888, 1–2). Grounded in documents like these, we can track how the learning legacies from Spelman’s earliest students established an institutional commitment to education for servant leadership. We can also see how such counter-narratives resisted dominant discourse that might otherwise have limited those authors’ access to social agency. Exercising an astute rhetorical pragmatism, attuned to both constraints and possibilities, Spelman’s first teachers and students produced a still-generative cultural resource. In records from these early years, we find valuable examples of black women students’ own counter-narratives. The early *Messenger* and its associated Archive—the layers of multifaceted cultural resources developed over time by tapping into that original archive’s narrative power—offer a welcome affirmation of African Americans’ cross-generational and cross-race collaborations in liberal arts learning. Leaders at the college today clearly convey this message to students, as well as to alumnae and other supporters. Here,
I will describe Spelman’s ongoing strategies for telling stories about itself and its mission; these are models for others committed to liberal arts learning with a community-oriented focus.

Revisiting the *Spelman Messenger* also reveals a counter-narrative correcting oversimplified versions of post-Civil War southern educational history—one that has important implications today for programs constructed as “service learning” and “community outreach.” Hopefully, disseminating a counter-history of the leadership behind this postbellum institution’s development as, actually, cross-racially collaborative will affirm a framework also emerging in some other university-community partnerships, in place of more “benevolent helping” approaches.

For too long the prevailing narrative of learning by freed people and their children credited whites from the North as saviors, traveling south to rescue helpless blacks from slavery-induced ignorance. The stereotype of the Yankee schoolmarm—whether idealized as a selfless angel or excoriated for her racist and/or regionalist sense of social hierarchy—dominated accounts both literary and scholarly. And certainly these women played a crucial part. Two from the post-Reconstruction generation, Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, were at the forefront of Spelman’s founding, as Emma DeLamotta’s account above noted. However, long before the migration of such northern educators to southern classrooms, blacks had been drawing on every means imaginable to help each other secure access to literacy and its pathway to social agency. That heritage and local leaders committed to it were essential to Packard and Giles’s imagining they could open a new school for black women in Atlanta in the early 1880s.

In accounts of the Reconstruction era before Spelman’s founding, we can see some hesitancy in prior scholarship to spotlight the leadership of African Americans themselves—like Harriet Jacobs in Alexandria, Virginia, or William and Ellen Craft in coastal Georgia. Resisting this gap, historian James Anderson cites the *Loyal Georgian* to illustrate how black leaders honored their colleagues from the North, but at the same time urged these supporters to get over “any vain reliance on their [supposedly] superior gifts . . . [of] intelligence or benevolence . . .” (*Education of Blacks*, 12). What the New England influx clearly did bring to economically impoverished freed people was resources, both materials (books, buildings) and people. In the decade after the war ended, organizations like the church-supported American Missionary Association (AMA) and the self-consciously secular New England Freedmen’s Aid Society (NEFAS) worked in concert with the Freedmen’s Bureau to set up schools across the South. For several years,
the roster of schoolhouses and students grew exponentially, along with the number of Yankee teachers (mostly white women) seeking to teach there. While some certainly held racist biases, initially viewing their students as inherently less capable, their private journals and correspondence suggest that positive shifts in attitude often developed through ongoing contact with pupils. And many of the northern teachers, as letters from individuals sponsored by NEFAS demonstrate, were dedicated to racial equality.\textsuperscript{15} Packard and Giles certainly represented such a stance.

In contrast to the majority pattern, some northern teachers were free blacks eager to uplift their own race, both by serving in the classroom and by promoting the enterprise in their writing. Published accounts like Charlotte Forten’s \textit{Atlantic Monthly} portrait of her work in Port Royal, and like those by white teachers writing for the \textit{Freedmen’s Record} of the NEFAS,\textsuperscript{16} stoked interest in the North. But, perhaps predictably, northerners’ commitment waned over time. Donations dropped. Politically, as Reconstruction came to an official end, federal troops pulled out of southern communities, making it increasingly dangerous for northern white women—typically shunned by local members of their own race—to keep schools running, particularly in remote rural places. In Columbus, Georgia, for instance, one small group of NEFAS teachers clung desperately to their school, even in the face of overt intimidation from night riders; they wrote heart-wrenching letters to lead administrator Ednah Cheney back in Boston, begging for continued funding, but eventually had to shut down when the society could no longer provide resources. “Cause fatigue” had set in among many northerners.

Fortunately, however, locally based coalitions of African Americans continued the effort to lift up the newly freed people through education. Black-run schools faced intense danger after Reconstruction. Yet opposition to African American learning was nothing new, as reflected in Frances Harper’s 1869 novel \textit{Minnie’s Sacrifice}, where the heroine is murdered by whites hoping to halt learning in her community. Ronald E. Butchart has documented that, even during the period when federal troops provided some protection, and clearly in the decades after Reconstruction’s official close, “the unrelenting terrorism targeting teachers, school-houses and students” continually “reinforced the black community’s folk knowledge . . . that while whites might tolerate a small cadre of educated blacks, any broader educational movement would reawaken the beast of white terrorism” (“Black Hope, White Power,” 37). But a people who had generations of experience eavesdropping on white children’s lessons in plantation
homes, holding night classes in the woods, or hiding literacy acquisition as in Frances Harper’s poem on Aunt Chloe “Learning to Read” (Foster, Brighter, 205)—such a determined community was not going to stop seeking education.

This precarious context faced white educators Packard and Giles when they arrived in Atlanta in 1881, hoping to open a school for black women. They had already taught together for years at various New England institutions, and Packard had been working, most recently, as secretary for the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society (WABHMS) in Boston.17 With a personal history that included having been shunted aside from leadership at a prestigious academy after conflict with a new male head of school, they came in part from an altruistic impulse and in part seeking self-advancement at a time when women’s administrative skills were easy to dismiss.18 The coalition that produced Spelman was thus an alliance joining people from different backgrounds who shared past frustrations of having been marginalized, but who also shared the confidence, capabilities, and energy to move forward through collaboration.

Thus, one story that Packard, Giles, and their students would repeatedly tell in the Spelman Messenger was about the efficacy of blacks’ and women’s leadership in education. So, a prerequisite for unpacking the rhetorical force of the Spelman Messenger and its present-day heirs is revisiting the cross-racial, cross-gender, and cross-region partnership that enabled the school’s founding despite the structural forces aligned against them.19

Reverend Frank Quarles, minister of the appropriately named Friendship Baptist Church, was one of many African Americans who had been striving to advance southern blacks’ education. Among his great skills was collaboration with whites. Quarles found vital allies in Packard and Giles. Reverend Quarles opened the basement of his church to launch the school for Christian girls and women. The enterprise began modestly enough with just under a dozen students on April 11, 1881. A key factor promoting a soon-burgeoning enrollment was Quarles’s leadership, which included drumming up funds and students from other black ministries in Atlanta. He even intervened when a misunderstanding between the Yankee teachers and their sponsoring group of Boston women threatened the new school’s fiscal viability. Quarles was on a funds-seeking and fence-mending trip to the North, in fact, when he tragically became ill and died. Though he didn’t live to see the phenomenal growth of the enterprise that began in his church basement, the pattern of collaboration he established with Packard and Giles—not to mention the entrée he provided for them into
black community groups—was essential to Spelman’s success.

Affirming that contribution, Spelman saluted Quarles’s essential leadership in an article for the spring 2012 version of the *Spelman Messenger*. The story reprinted a speech delivered at the Founders Day Convocation in Sisters Chapel on April 10 of that year by Muriel Ketchum Yarbrough, class of 1949. The great-granddaughter of Father Quarles, Yarbrough had been given Spelman’s Spirit Award. In the context of that honor, this “Fifth Generation” print account included a family tree tracing eight alumnae’s ties back to their shared ancestor, Father Quarles.  

Other alumnae I’ve spoken with about Spelman’s early days can describe Quarles’s foundational role. Indeed, I first heard about “Father Quarles” from Deborah Mitchell, during the KCAC project, as noted above. Deborah herself interviewed “Aunt Ruth” (as the family called her) in March of
According to Deborah’s vivid notes from that conversation: “There was no stopping Aunt Ruth” on the subject of Quarles’s leadership and its connections with previous work his family had already done to promote African American education post-Emancipation.21

Yet scholars have been somewhat less inclined to highlight Quarles.22 Some accounts refer exclusively to Packard and Giles as the founders.23 In contrast, Florence Read, herself one of Spelman’s presidents (1927–53),24 headlines Quarles’s importance to Spelman’s history. Noting their immediate efforts to make contact with potential allies upon arriving in Atlanta on April 1, 1881, Read recounts how Packard and Giles were told that the “most important person in Atlanta . . . to see . . . was the Rev. Frank Quarles,” since he “was regarded as the most influential colored preacher in the state,” leading a congregation of 1,500 at his Friendship Church (Story of Spelman, 42). Read further reports that Quarles welcomed the two women as sent by God in answer to his prayers for “teachers for the Baptist women and girls of Georgia” (43). In line with this view, the figure of Quarles appeared prominently on stage during the Founders Day performance I attended in April of 2011.

Similarly, Spelman has a longstanding tradition of honoring its first alumnae as educational leaders themselves. And rightly so, since, as archivist Taronda Spencer pointed out to me in several personal notes, many of the earliest students “were older women,” so that their relationship with Packard and Giles was more collegial than we see in the stereotyped images of postbellum white motherly teachers with black child learners.25

One of Taronda’s clarifying margin comments to this effect appeared on a flyer she sent me while I was first drafting this chapter—a printed advertisement originally distributed on April 6, 1881, to announce the upcoming opening of the new school “in the basement of Friendship Baptist church,” where “Instruction, pervaded by religious principle” was to “be given in all the usual branches.” Taronda stressed that the significant prior life experiences that Spelman’s first women students brought to the school left an indelible mark.26 Possessing mature goals, these first students eagerly looked past the rather humble basement setting to the race uplift they would be empowered to deliver from the learning legacy nurtured there.

One of Packard’s many handwritten letters to supporters from this period underscored this pattern. This missive enthusiastically profiled student “Mrs. Mary Ann Brooks,” as “a widow whose husband died very many years ago.” Packard admitted that Brooks’s studies represented “up-hill work” at times. Yet however challenging the formal curriculum might be, Packard
insisted, “Brooks [had] a heart full of our Savior’s spirit, which makes her long to ‘uplift the fallen.’” In line with that aim, Packard reported, Brooks had herself “established a little school for street waifs.” Like many later Spelman students, Brooks began teaching while still herself a student. So, Packard recounted, Brooks arrived “every morning to Spelman’s Primary Department as a pupil there,” unabashed that, at “forty years old,” she was among the oldest pupils. Always “very attentive not only to what is taught, but also to the manner in which it [was] taught,” Brooks would then, “in the afternoon,” move “to her own little school” “to repeat the lessons she had learned in the morning,” Packard explained. Thus, through Mary Ann Brooks, the pioneering enterprise in Father Quarles’s church basement was already reaching “scores of boys,” who were acquiring “respect and confidence” from their teacher, as she “rouse[d] aspirations for true nobility of character” among her pupils. 

Packard’s story of Brooks’s desire to blend student and teacher roles should remind us how much work remains to be done to reconstruct a full history of postbellum black women’s education and related learning legacies for today. Indeed, despite the centrality of Spelman itself as one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) of great historical importance, the extensive archive of Packard’s personal correspondence held in the college’s archive represents an as-yet under-accessed resource. Although I hope that others will provide more extensive contextualized analysis of these semipublic texts, by drawing on my own preliminary readings, I can point to striking counter-narrative features there.

First of all, Packard’s epistolary records of her years in Atlanta repeatedly highlighted the cross-racial partnerships crucial to launching Spelman. A key dimension of that networking involved convincing white male leaders (whose vision for “New South” politics was then coalescing) that educating black women would contribute to the economic advancement of postwar southern communities. As a persistent promoter of black women’s social agency, Packard would use her own writing to bridge between local black and white leaders, as well as between the Atlanta institution’s day-to-day needs and the women (and men) back in the North whose financial support could ensure its growth. Central to this complex rhetorical networking, meanwhile, was the discursive construction of a counter-narrative portrait of black womanhood itself—or, more precisely, of mature, educated Christian black womanhood—as a resource for the nation as a whole.

The claims Packard made for women like Brooks—for their capabilities, commitment, and influence—are not surprising now, in an age when
black women’s leadership has become so visible in American culture. However, in the 1880s, in the supposedly “New” South, far less positive characterizations dominated. This presuffrage and Jim Crow time period was particularly tenuous for African American women. As Anne Gere and I noted in “Gendered Literacy in Black and White,” black women’s forays into print culture then often took on a corrective stance, asserting their commendable literacy practices, intelligence, and their “moral character” (664). Similarly, Packard and Giles’s cultivation of support for Spelman among whites in both the South and the North required nonstop rhetorical intervention in public as well as personal writing. Paradoxically, the central vehicle for that effort would be created through funding from white male power structures.

Sending Out the Messenger

Only a few years after Spelman’s founding, Packard and her colleagues secured an ideal avenue for circulating counter-narratives to promote the institution’s agenda by establishing a print shop where students and teachers produced their own in-house periodical, the Spelman Messenger. Atticus Haygood, an influential local white leader, called Spelman to the attention of the Slater Fund, which was established by the industrialist John F. Slater in 1882 to help educate formerly enslaved peoples and their descendants. Already enrolling well over five hundred students by the mid-1880s, Spelman was a logical site for Slater’s support. Slater Fund donations to Spelman backed course work in such practical skills as dressmaking, millinery, and basic nursing techniques. One Slater donation purchased a printing press and supplies so that Spelman students could learn typesetting. For cultural arbiters like the Slater Fund’s managers, the Spelman Messenger would have been viewed as an organ of industrial education—providing practice in a job skill—not a site for advancing what today would be called critical literacy, and not a means for assisting Spelman’s creative navigation of the developing battle between industrial education and liberal arts learning for African Americans. However, consistent with the ambitious institutional vision shared by Quarles, Packard, and Giles; supported by the careful management of its teacher-editors; and, most of all, articulated through the voices of student writers, the Spelman Messenger carved out an intricate counter-narrative embodying women’s advanced, yet pragmatic, learning.

As the fulcrum for that balancing act, the Spelman Messenger would, over time, blend celebration of experiential job skills training with demonstra-
tions of higher-order liberal arts learning. Accordingly, on one page of the June 1891 issue, a report of an “annual entertainment” of literary recitation was juxtaposed with an announcement of a new “proficiency” certificate in advanced printing skills—a credential that, the Messenger indicated, had already enabled “[s]everal of our compositors” to garner regular employment “in other offices” beyond campus (June 1891, 4). On the Messenger’s pages themselves, meanwhile, type set by Spelman’s pupils would facilitate the continued dissemination of other brands of knowledge.

Mentored by Spelman’s archivist Taronda Spencer, I’ve read the issues of the Messenger from its inaugural number through the turn of the twentieth century. (A version of the publication still exists today, with its core audience now alumnae.) Here, I’m focusing on the first decades of the publication’s history, 1885–1909, because during this period the seminary (later college) was most vulnerable and thus the most dependent on effective communication with supporters. These years also match the administrative tenures of Packard and Giles, each of whom served as the school’s leader, with Packard passing away in 1891 and Giles in 1909. This period represented both a decisive phase in Spelman’s maturation process and a challenging stage in the broader efforts by African American women to resist post-Reconstruction attacks on their identity.

In that vein, as Frances Smith Foster chronicles in Written By Herself, the history of African American women’s authorship in this period has coalesced around well-educated practitioners like Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Harper, and Ida B. Wells. Through their work, in Foster’s formulation, we see a race-based tradition wherein literature became “one of the tools they employed to bring into being the new world order they envisioned” (179). And, as Foster says, combining political uplift with aesthetic productivity often entailed blending “the secular and the spiritual” by linking “religious imperatives” with other themes (178). Spelman’s periodical is part of this tradition. Joining with the sustained efforts of publications like the Woman’s Era (the influential print publication led by clubwoman Josephine Ruffin), the early Spelman Messenger’s counter-narratives creatively addressed the oppressive context of Jim Crow. Strategically, the Messenger of this period laid the foundations for rhetorical pragmatism still evident today in venues like Founders Day, which itself has been faithfully celebrated, from the first issue forward, in the periodical’s pages.

By reading through springtime issues of the early Messenger still retrievable in the Spelman archive today, we can retrace the mutually reinforcing relationship between African American print culture, across decades, and
the annual Spelman Founders Day celebrations. That is, yearly accounts in the Messenger repeatedly signaled the importance of Founders Day to the Spelman community, while also allowing those unable to attend in person to participate through reading about it afterwards. Meanwhile, on a parallel track, regular preview and post-event stories in the Atlanta Daily World have marked the importance of the tradition to the larger Atlanta black community, reiterating the central position of Spelman as a beacon of race pride. Even now, a legacy-enhancing tradition of race-based storytelling continues through an interactive network of the original Messenger’s print archive, layered reiterations of its themes in texts published later, and annual on-campus performances drawing on all these resources.

To characterize this learning legacy in its initial stage, I will highlight two of the recurring features of the early Messenger—also unmistakably emphasized in the Founders Day celebration of Spelman’s 130th anniversary, which I attended in 2011. First, the publication repeatedly presented student writing and alumnae portraits exalting the learning Spelman women were achieving. Second, the periodical told—and retold—the institution’s history to reinforce Spelman’s significance and sustainability.

**Addressing External Audiences**

As we’d expect from skilled rhetoricians like Packard and Giles, anticipated readership for the periodical shaped its depictions of Spelman women in their day. One audience was potential white supporters inside and outside Georgia. Therefore, the turn-of-century Messenger carefully balanced assertions of black women’s race-based progress with characterizations cast to reassure white readers. Portrayals of both the curriculum and student learning often aligned more with religious/spiritual and “industrial” goals than intellectual or political ones. That is, while affirming that the products of a Spelman education could be counted on to advance their race, Messenger stories concurrently suggested that the brand of uplift being achieved would not undermine the traditional social order. In line with Molly Andrews’s characterization of counter-narratives as often incorporating language from the dominant culture (see chapter 1), rather than presenting a straightforwardly resistant rhetoric, texts in the Messenger during these years navigated cautiously. Some echoed the accommodationist language of Booker T. Washington’s controversial “Atlanta Compromise” speech, delivered at the Cotton Exposition of 1895. Simultaneously, though, in foregrounding (former) students’ engagement with the liberal arts and the advanced
Figure 2.2. Masthead of the *Spelman Messenger*, April 1891. Courtesy of the Spelman College Archives.
literacy skills they were using to disseminate that knowledge, the publication affiliated as well with W. E. B. DuBois’s “talented tenth” concept.38

Descriptions of Spelman’s curriculum in the very first issue of the Messenger established this complex pattern. Invoking quantitative measures, this overview announced: “Last year there were enrolled five hundred and eighteen; today, there are enrolled over five hundred and seventy. From two teachers the faculty has increased to sixteen, but twenty or more are needed.” Blending documentation of growth with a related call for enhanced resources, this inaugural Messenger also justified requests for supporters’ aid by positioning the curriculum to appeal to white northern and “New South” cultural arbiters: “The Industrial Department receives special attention. The girls are taught cooking, sewing in all its branches, general house-work, and laundry-work. A printing office has recently been added—a gift from the Slater Fund—in the use of which the girls can be taught to set type thus opening another avenue for earning an honest livelihood.”39 Ignoring the direct evidence of the Messenger’s other content—student accounts of learning through arts and humanities study—this narrative incorporated a then-dominant narrative for African American women’s education, even as, on later pages, the same issue verified pupils’ mastery of deep reading and polished writing. To finesse this contradiction, the Messenger’s front-page story moved from touting “Industrial,” job-skills-based learning to remind potential donors that black women did require advanced curricular content, for the good of the larger society: “But while the aim is to make their education practical, their spiritual welfare is first in the minds of the teachers. . . . The very success of the school creates a demand for means and better facilities for carrying on the work. The work is imperative, and must be done. Educate and Christianize the women, and you save the race” (“Spelman Seminary,” March 1885, 1).

Here the institution-level authorial voice (presumably Packard, Giles, and/or other teachers) called upon arguments that had been successfully used earlier in the nineteenth century to justify advanced learning for white, middle-class women.40 Having taught at several New England institutions whose curricula benefited from this same “educate-the-mothers” argument, the Yankee women shepherding Spelman’s progress knew how to apply this gendered rhetoric, leavened with a race-based focus on “Industrial” training. In these early Messenger stories, therefore, the publication was already creating learning legacies by providing access to agency for individual students via a rationale of benefiting society as a whole.

To maintain this both/and stance, the Messenger astutely incorporated
a rhetorical device quite familiar to readers of prior African American writing—the testimonial. Echoing whites’ endorsements of antebellum texts by and about African American women, consistent with reports by teachers affirming pupils’ successes during Reconstruction, and in line with other publications by Spelman supporters like Atticus Haygood, prominent white voices in the *Messenger* testified to Spelman’s social efficacy. Sometimes the *Messenger* presented these endorsements indirectly via praise for supporters, as in an 1891 tenth anniversary-of-school invocation of “Hon. John D. Rockefeller and family” as “ever . . . dear to the colored people of the south,” due to “the generosity that has never failed to respond to our appeal for money” (April 1891, 3). Similarly, in such salutes as one confirming that “the very title of our institution calls to mind the honored parents of Mrs. Rockefeller” (that is, the Spelmans), *Messenger* invocations of the main donors’ generosity aimed to attract still more dollars from the magnate himself and others. Similarly, the *Messenger* thanked the “Hon. Sidney Root of Atlanta,” who, “very indifferent at first, became a warm friend.”

Spelman’s leaders also incorporated direct testimonials from influential white leaders, as in a May 1887 reprint of a *Harper’s Weekly* article by Charles Dudley Warner praising the seminary. Occasionally, stories like these in the periodical might be complemented by a free-standing flyer, such as one printed in December of 1887, with an endorsement by Atticus Haygood (by then secretary of the Slater Fund). Calling Spelman “this phenomenally successful and useful school,” Haygood credited Packard and Giles with having “wrought steadily and wisely, with firm faith in God and abiding compassion for the poor and needy of the colored race.” Haygood intoned: “No investment known to me shows better results than the money and labor laid out in the work of Spelman Seminary.” He urged readers to donate too, since “[t]his needed money will yield very large dividends.”

The thank-you and testimonial genres remind us that the *Messenger* had complex layers of authorship. Just as donors to educational institutions today can exert influence, the financial sources that Spelman depended upon shaped the publication’s content. Cultural arbiters such as Haygood generated both literal and ideological intrusions into the early *Messenger*—with these interventions carrying all the more weight since they simultaneously stood in for white male power brokers like New South spokesman Henry Grady looming just outside the institution’s gates. In that vein, the effusive reprint of Charles Dudley Warner’s story from *Harper’s*, refer-
enced above, transitioned from complimenting the core curriculum to say, “it is of its industrial department that I wish to speak” (Warner, “Colored Schools,” May 1887, 1). If, to his credit, Warner closed his paean to the program’s training in cooking, laundering, and sewing with praise for the new nursing division—a more innovative curriculum at that time than that for domestic workers—even here he imagined graduates doing subservient gendered work: “gentle, patient, dexterous” when “in the sick-chamber.” On balance, however supportive comments like Haygood’s and Warner’s may be, their statements also verify the influence white male leaders then exerted over the school and the skill with which the Messenger managed these relationships.

White women were also a crucial audience. One recipient of repeated thanks within the Messenger was the WABHMS, which for years subsidized teacher salaries. This Boston-based group had an occasionally rocky relationship with Packard, Giles, and their colleagues, partly because the team situated in Atlanta sometimes resisted directives from the North. As mentioned earlier, Reverend Quarles had played a peacemaking role during one of this uneasy alliance’s tussles. Packard, for her part, tried valiantly via personal correspondence to cultivate the male-run American Baptist Home Mission Society in New York, then led by corresponding secretary Henry L. Morehouse (for whom Morehouse College, Spelman’s male counterpart institution nearby, would be renamed in 1913). In part due to careful writing in the Messenger, Packard made gradual progress at fence-mending with the women’s auxiliary group. A strong attachment with the WABHMS was vital—both to maintain salary support and to legitimize Spelman’s commitment to Protestant Christian affiliation. In a broader sense, linking to the then-dominant social narrative of Protestantism was essential for student recruitment as well. Small wonder, then, that the masthead of the Messenger proclaimed this school motto: “Our Whole School for Christ.”

In contrast to these conventional elements, the rhetoric of the Messenger increasingly fostered a counter-narrative of groundbreaking black women’s education. Counterbalancing the testimonials and thank-you pieces directed to conservative white (male) supporters, other stories described visits to the school by innovative women educators who thereby burnished Spelman’s progressive image. In December 1895, for example, the Messenger reported that “Miss A. M. Ely and Miss Lucy M. Salmon, professors at Vassar College,” had, when in town for the Atlanta Exposition, “paid a visit to Spelman. ‘The Vassar of the South’ gladly welcomed representatives of
Vassar in the North. Come again, sisters” (*Messenger*, December 1895, 4).50 Similarly, an enthusiastic feature noted Frances E. W. Harper’s trip to the school during one of her lecture tours (December 1889, 6). Forecasting parallel presentations of distinguished women leaders at future Founders Day events, these stories in the early *Messenger* established such connections as an ongoing rhetorical strategy.

**Spelman’s Own Celebrities**

*Messenger*-enacted rhetorical moves to bond with figures such as author Frances Harper and Vassar professors Ely and Salmon reaffirmed Spelman’s gendered pedigree. Perhaps even more important to defining the institution’s distinctive identity in the long run, though, were stories of student role models for women-led race-based uplift. As pointed counter-narratives to resist negative stereotypes of African American women, these accounts did important cultural work. Accordingly, this subgenre, which I call *Spelman story-portraits*, actually claimed the most space in the *Messenger*’s first decades. Through these accounts, over time, the qualities of a Spelman woman took hold around the capacities for social action that she attained through study and then applied to the larger benefit of her race.

In the Packard-Giles leadership era, accounts by and about the founding students drew special attention. These voices repeatedly chronicled Spelman’s progress from the oft-invoked basement days. Personal stories balanced details about the challenging first site with claims that those same struggles had molded students’ character and, by extension, Spelman’s. Such stories played a central role in each anniversary issue; later, as these women grew older and gradually passed away, obituaries positioning their lives within Spelman’s larger history combined memorials with reaffirmations of institutional vision. An article on Emma S. DeLamotta in 1903 stands out in this regard. In a quote from DeLamotta herself, the *Messenger* shared her observation about acquiring a voice through Spelman-sponsored learning: “I am not going this way again; I must say what I have to say now” (November 1903, 1). Through this founding student’s unassuming yet telling declaration of agency, the *Messenger* urged others to follow her example. The periodical thus honored her legacy and reasserted its power as a model.

Students from the “basement days” had originally brought limited literacy skills to their schooling, leading to a modest curriculum at first. Yet Packard and Giles (like their founding partner Quarles) had strong aspi-
rations for advanced liberal arts teaching. Hence, *Messenger* stories gradually presented more emphatic narratives touting the higher-level liberal arts access being provided to Spelman students and its benefits to the larger society. Two early graduates—Carrie Walls and Nora Gordon—embody this message. Both wrote for the *Messenger* as students and became model graduates.\(^5\)

While still enrolled, Walls, originally from Columbus, Georgia, created her own regular feature, the “Children’s Exchange.” These letter-narratives emphasized a major learning outcome of a Spelman liberal arts education—being able to teach others. Walls enacted this role on multiple levels: by serving as a schoolmarm herself during vacations; by writing about her teaching experiences and thus instructing child readers; and by demonstrating, within her *Messenger* stories, that Spelman students were ideal candidates for uplifting the race. In this combination of classroom-based instruction with storytelling as itself a form of teaching, Walls provided an example for later Spelman graduates, even as she also created a textual learning legacy that we can still draw upon today.

In one “Children’s Exchange” piece, for example, she crafted an astute narrative describing a rural school where she taught younger learners:

My Dear Little Folks of the North and South:

I think you will like to hear about the summer school of a Spelman girl, and I always like to please the little folks. My school was in Rock Fence, one hundred and forty-two miles east from Atlanta, and fourteen miles in the country from Elberton, the shiretown of the county. I have taught there two terms. My schoolhouse, a rude log hut, fifteen by ten, also serves as the church of the district. It stands in a beautiful pine grove and has a very large pleasant playground. The school this year numbered forty-two, thirty of them being boys. The reason there are so few girls is, many of the parents think it useless to educate their daughters so do not send them. I opened school every morning at eight o’clock with the Lord’s Prayer which the pupils repeated after me. In this way many of them learned it. We next repeated a passage of Scripture in the same way, after which I explained it as well as I could. This exercise was followed by singing; then came the recitations which continued until five o’clock in the afternoon (November 1886, 6).
When we apply a counter-narrative lens to Walls’s epistolary story today, we can see its strategic blending of conservative and resistant arguments. The salutation in Walls’s letter signaled her wished-for audience as located in both “the North and South,” signifying her awareness that the Atlanta school was actually a cross-regional enterprise, still in need of northern supporters. In hailing “little folks,” she envisioned young readers, of course, but also, by extension, their parents, who themselves could come to understand the value of Spelman as a source of Christian teachers. Walls’s narrative also offered an implicit plea for African American girls to have access to education. She made this tradition-resistant case both in a critique of “parents [who] think it useless to educate their daughters” (offered as an explanation of the gender disparity in her summer school classroom) and, indirectly, through her self-presentation as able to provide spiritual and intellectual training, even in “a rude log hut,” based on her own education at Spelman.

Walls’s description of her rural schoolhouse was surely pitched to echo the “basement days” of Spelman’s own first students. Underscoring the literal constraints of her current teaching space, she nonetheless proclaimed her ability to pass along the legacy of her own advanced learning. She declared: “While teaching in these log huts we were very much troubled when the summer storms came up, because when the rain poured, we could scarcely find a dry place in the house; but if the wind came with the rain we were much worse off. When it blew from the south I crowded my scholars into the north side of the room; if from the north, we went to the south side; thus we traveled till the rain was over. Sometimes the rain seemed to come in on all sides, then I raised my umbrella and did the best I could” (6). Like her foremothers in Spelman’s first days, however, Walls and her young students determinedly overcame these constraints, putting in a full day’s work. Meanwhile, Walls depicted her teaching as a natural extension of her studies at Spelman: “During our vacation, when we are away from our pleasant home (Spelman) we not only teach but try to live by the text, ‘Freely ye have received, freely give.’ As our dear teachers give us from their store of knowledge so we try to give to those who have less advantages” (6).

The headnote to Walls’s story invited her young readers to write back to her, in line with the “Exchange” title. Many were doing so. Within the January 1887 installment, she printed responses to some of their questions, such as a “May Woolridge” query about Santa Claus and another’s request for information about Walls’s Sabbath school. This installment ended with
a letter to “Cousin Carrie” (Walls’s regular signature) from Rosa Stanly, a “little friend” in Wild Cat, Georgia. Rosa explained: “I know you are wondering how I learned of you in this far-off corner, but I saw a Messenger that my teacher had and read the column for little folks. I knew you would like to hear from me even if I was so far in the country” (“Children’s Exchange,” January 1887, 6). In the January 1888 installment, Walls’s correspondents ranged from children attending Spelman’s laboratory school on campus and others from around Georgia to Josie M. Freeman, who wrote all the way from Salem, Massachusetts, that she had “read quite a number of Spelman Messengers, and liked them very much” (“Children’s Exchange,” January 1887, 6). In an earlier feature, a report on Spelman’s lab school, Walls encouraged her correspondents to keep writing her: “How glad I was to hear from so many this month; your letters are a proof of your interest in the Children’s Exchange” (“Children’s Exchange,” February 1886, 6). Walls’s repeated moves to engage directly with young readers helped the Messenger promote a network of far-flung participation in the Spelman enterprise. Belying stereotypes of rural black culture as cut off from the larger world, and consistent with Benedict Anderson’s conception of imagined affiliations facilitated through print-based exchange, Walls and her periodical stories built community across otherwise-separate social spaces.56

Walls's multifaceted and cross-regional teaching continued after she graduated in 1888 with the highest honors in her class. In the next year, she taught school in Belton, South Carolina. She married another educator, Mark H. Gassaway, and they both taught from 1890 until 1919 at the Greeley Institute in Anderson, South Carolina. In 1919, the Gassaways moved to Cleveland, where Carrie’s husband pursued a career in manufacturing. Carrie remained active as learner and teacher. She took summer courses at the Cheyney Institute in Pennsylvania one year and at Case Western Reserve another. She taught handicrafts at a settlement house in Cleveland. Meanwhile, the Gassaways had seven children, two of whom attended Morehouse. Carrie herself maintained strong ties with Spelman, making donations and corresponding with institutional leaders until her death in Cleveland in 1935.57

Like Walls, Nora Gordon regularly contributed to the Messenger. And, like Walls, Gordon crafted vivid chronicles of her own Spelman-enabled teaching. For one article framed as a “Dear Messenger” letter, Gordon described herself as “truly glad to get back to my dear Spelman home” when a new term began, but also eager to “give you a description of Victoria, the place where I taught last summer.” Again echoing Walls, Gordon portrayed
her school as remote—set in a “rude little country town . . . about fifty miles northwest of Chattanooga.” Gordon admitted, “As a rule, the people of this part of Tennessee have had very few advantages[,] hence they care very little about Christianity and education.” Yet, she reported, her teaching had made a difference, as “many have promised to begin life anew” (December 1887, 2). Anticipating future Founders Day performances by today’s students, these stories by Gordon emphasized how Spelman’s social impact reached far beyond its Atlanta home.

Gordon wrote poetry for the Messenger as well. The November 1886 issue contained one of her lyrics, celebrating the fall reopening of school (1). Her subsequent “Emancipation Poem” avowed: “In ignorance and wickedness / We must not now remain,” but instead press on to “cleanse our race.” The poem asked God to “Aid us to help our brother up, / In Afric’s heathen land, / Till all our people, taught of Thee, / Rejoice a ransomed band” (February 1887, 5). By imagining a global, pan-African learning community, this text also marked a new learning legacy of the Messenger’s student authors and anticipated Gordon’s own upcoming role as a missionary in the Congo.

The early Messenger’s incorporation of such poetic voices claimed a distinctive rhetorical agency for its student writing as both popular and literary, both gendered and race-oriented. Many late nineteenth-century periodicals were circulating poetry as a popular form, aimed at broader audiences than we would tend to envision for the genre today. Furthermore, as Paula Bennett’s extensive archival recovery of poems from diverse nineteenth-century periodicals has shown, women poets of this period regularly engaged in serious social issues. Given the still-pervasive stereotypes depicting black women as unrefined, the Messenger’s frequent use of student lyrics employing poetic conventions also positioned its authors in a tradition of women’s aesthetic productivity linked to a cultured racial identity. Decades earlier, as referenced above, Phillis Wheatley’s lyrics had been greeted with both enthusiasm and some disbelief in her authorship because the idea of a well-educated black woman poet was then surprising. By the time the first Messenger poems were appearing, however, Frances E. W. Harper had more confidently claimed a free black poetic voice associated both with African American causes and a refined personal identity. Thus, the young women composing poems for the Spelman Messenger, and the teachers who encouraged this cultural work, would have seen their compositions as accruing valuable symbolic capital—for the authors and for the school.
Figure 2.3. Nora Gordon, early Spelman graduate and missionary to the Congo. Courtesy of the Spelman College Archives.
Enabling Communal Agency

On the front page of the Messenger’s April 1885 second issue, a poem signed by “A Student” spoke directly to readers and commended the periodical itself for reaching out with news of the institution:

I know you will be happy  
To have the “Messenger” come,  
And tell you the news of Spelman,  
And the good that’s being done.

Personifying the Messenger as a womanly speaker who would be “bearing the news to all,” this brief lyric promised that the periodical would share stories “From the early start of Spelman, / E’en from the very fount,” along with up-to-date accounts of how the school was preparing students to serve “our people, / Who are ignorant and rude / . . . To teach them to be good” (“The Messenger,” April 1885, 1).

We’d hope that this text’s characterization of black recipients of Spelman graduates’ teaching as otherwise “ignorant and rude” would not appear in an American publication today.62 Still, we should acknowledge the rhetorical role of such portraits for the original Messenger readership, which included so many powerful whites eager to maintain social hierarchies. Similarly, aesthetic tastes of today might lead us to cringe at the sing-song rhyme and meter in poems like this one. However, shifts in how we now judge lyric excellence should not obscure the efficacy—the rhetorical pragmatism—of the periodical’s presenting early Spelman students like this one as skilled poets by the standards of their own time.63

However we respond now to these poems’ techniques, the Messenger’s constant retelling of institutional history may be easier to appreciate as an astute rhetorical enterprise. By regularly revisiting its church basement past, but also chronicling ongoing stages in Spelman’s growth, the periodical set up recurring counter-narrative themes to show that Spelman had survived challenges; had always been allied with powerful supporters; and had steadily expanded in size, infrastructure, and cultural capital. Thus, this subgenre forcefully resisted stereotyped portrayals of blacks and their institutions as unstable in the face of pressures based on racial identity.

From the periodical’s inception in March 1885, history-telling in the Spelman Messenger would support the institution’s long-term health.64 An “Our Needs” article on page one of the first issue trumpeted growth:
“Our buildings are literally overflowing. . . . Our membership is 575 and promises to reach 600 before the term closes. . . . The dining room is so crowded that the students sit shoulder to shoulder, and back to back.” A nearby front-page announcement explained: “Board and tuition are $7.00 per month; instrumental music, $2.00 extra.” Such details reiterated the literal value of this learning opportunity and implicitly reminded readers of the institution’s being attentively managed. Meanwhile, in each retelling across the Packard-Giles leadership years, the foundational story served as a launching pad for outlining current needs. By linking past history to in-the-moment fundraising, the Messenger dignified the process of donor cultivation and aligned giving dollars to Spelman with promoting the entire African American race. A theme of continual curricular development, linked repeatedly to calls for enhancing the institution’s physical and human infrastructure, was embodied in the visual rhetoric of a redesigned 1892 masthead. Images of two new buildings appeared along with a rendering of the publication’s name designed to connote an ever-organic identity.

Accounts characterizing Spelman’s curriculum emphasized its Christian promotion of servant leadership. Thus, the April 1891 issue took as its theme the school’s tenth anniversary and that milestone’s implications. In “Our First Decade,” Mrs. T. M. Woodward, class of 1890, described her experience at Spelman in these terms: “Among the many things for which we have to be thankful are spiritual growth, spiritual salvation, being taught how to reach the highest end of life” (2). She contended that the foundation for a life of service was set in place during her Spelman years, which she directly connected to the previous inspirational generation of students who labored “in the basement.” In invoking both the original church basement site and the institution’s commitment to spiritual teaching, Woodward positioned herself and Spelman as Christian leaders. She applauded how graduates had “been promoted to high positions.” But she leavened this claim of individual success with an emphasis on service: Spelman graduates “have gone out into the world to raise fallen humanity, to lift up the downcast, to bind up the bruised and pour in the oil of consolation” (2). Comparing this ever-widening servant leadership to the example of “two good Christian women who came from the North, seeking the poor and humble that they might receive good from their liberal hands” (i.e., Packard and Giles), Woodward also pointed to familiar alumnae role models—the “Two [who] are in Africa expounding to those poor heathen, the gospel taught them ten years ago in the basement of Friendship Church.”

The graduates exalted by Woodward were Nora Gordon and her friend
Clara Howard, both of whom by 1891 were teaching in Baptist mission schools in the Congo. Reports on their work kept readers of the Messenger informed about how these two were extending the influence of their alma mater. In addition, while overseas, Gordon wrote for white northern Baptist mission periodicals. Addressing a mixed-race audience, Gordon joined a literacy network nested within the massive American foreign mission enterprise, then claiming an even larger cohort of US women supporters than either the suffrage or temperance movements. For instance, in an 1892 piece entitled “Africa. The Congo Mission,” appearing in The Baptist Missionary Magazine, Gordon recounted the contributions she and Clara Howard were making by using their Spelman-acquired abilities:

I help Miss Howard in the afternoon station school, and have charge of the printing. We are now getting out a circular letter for the churches and schools. In this letter the people are urged upon to support their own schools, native teachers, etc. We have many reasons to believe that they will do this most heartily. (January 1892, 26)

When we read this brief, seemingly straightforward account in light of Gordon’s personal learning history and Spelman’s institutional context, we see how she was employing both the typesetting “industrial” skills and the rhetorically sophisticated writing abilities, honed back in Atlanta, to address a transnational audience.

In transferring her Spelman-based learning legacy to a new global context, Gordon affirmed not only the socially constructed nature of her identity but also her individual agency. In this way, she demonstrated how early student writing for the Messenger, though guided by white teachers, had also facilitated her race-based life choices. Indeed, if we make over-simplified assumptions about teacher-editor control of such writing, we deny authors like Gordon and Carrie Walls the very agency they worked so hard to attain through education. After all, we have come a long way from the period when Jean Yellin had to press for recognition of the authorial agency of a figure like Harriet Jacobs. Still, the impact of white-controlled cultural forces on black writing remains a point of intense examination. On the one hand, textual products associated with whites’ teaching of black students have been convincingly critiqued as embodying a mental and thus identity-shaping “colonizing” process, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o points out in texts such as Decolonising the Mind, forcefully critiquing colonial educational programs like he experienced in Kenya.
On the other hand, as Ryan Dunch and others such as Lamin Sanneh and Ngũgĩ himself have argued, in an even broader comparative context, we must recognize that colonized learners in such cross-cultural contact zones are perfectly capable of choosing which aspects of a white-directed curriculum, cast within a Christian mission context, to adopt. In the case of the early Messenger, life choices made by many Spelman alumnae, including their continued submissions to the publication after graduation, suggest that they embraced the institution and the community-made periodical touting its work as promoting both personal growth and race uplift along with a Christian capacity for servant leadership. White teachers and other sponsors certainly guided the overall framework and even individual texts within the Messenger in its first decades. But black student authors chose to come to Spelman and chose to stay. And the black alumnae who continued to write for the publication long after graduation affirmed that their learning there had generated a race-oriented vision of what women could do for black communities beyond the campus itself. Through texts by, for, and about African American women, therefore, the early Messenger helped produce an empowered race-and-gender-linked network while expanding the social influence available to alumnae. As such, we can view the Messenger as a location of ongoing collaboration that helped maintain a community of women learners; they, in turn, helped sustain a shared legacy through their reading and writing.

A letter submitted by a former Spelman student for the May 1888 Messenger issue offers a case in point. Writing from Stilesboro, Georgia, where she was continuing her own independent studies of “Moral Philosophy” and “Bible History” while managing a school with “104 pupils enrolled” and “a daily average of over 80,” Sarah H. Lay described her work “teach[ing] arithmetic, geography, and grammar.” She also outlined her introduction of a new subject into the curriculum. “When I began, there was no writing done in the school; I now have a class of twenty, doing nicely.” She envisioned sending some of her own students to Spelman, where, following in her footsteps, they could “go and prepare for future usefulness.” For herself, her main hope was “trying to do my duty that I may please Christ and the people and that my work may speak well for Spelman” (6). Significantly, because she still had access to the Spelman network represented in the Messenger’s pages, Sarah Lay could send writing about her ongoing teaching back into that literacy community, so that her print storytelling itself, like that of Carrie Walls and other Messenger authors, enacted another form of sisterly instruction.
Performing History

The postgraduate experiences of Messenger writers like Carrie Walls, Nora Gordon, and Sarah Lay point to the positive long-term personal impact of their study at Spelman and their storytelling about it. But there remains another question to ask about these learning legacies. In what ways have the narratives generated by such past students provided cultural resources for those enrolled at Spelman more recently? Are the counter-narratives recorded in the Messenger, supplemented with new story layers over time and passed across generations, really enabling other women’s agency today? Based upon the Founders Day performance I attended as one example, I’d shout out “yes.” Spelman’s April 7, 2011, Founders Day, “The Sustaining Vision: 130 Years and Leading,” heralded a distinctive anniversary while also underscoring how the college continues to access its learning legacies, including those from the early Messenger. By reflecting on one year’s performance and its echoes of the archive I’ve studied, we can also see the event as a model for strategically marshaling the liberal arts to build solidarity around a progressive educational vision. Thus, as an example of how purposeful cultural rhetoric can enable collaborative social agency today, the yearly Spelman Founders Day holds significance far beyond its particular institutional setting.

An analysis of the annual event at Spelman as rhetorical pragmatism in action requires us to recognize each annual text as both a unique performance shaped by a given year’s participants and a recurring genre self-consciously invoking (and reconstituting) a shared cultural memory. Accordingly, my account below of one year’s celebration exemplifies how each annual performance participates in multiple layers of history-making and transdisciplinary storytelling, while simultaneously extending that ongoing process. Every performance draws on a rich narrative archive, creating a unique new individual record that adds to the continued layering of cultural capital available to future community members. That is, each Founders Day marshals the resources of prior texts such as the Messenger and previous performances, then blends those materials with new contributions from Spelman’s current students and supporters. Through this collaborative textual production, the annual event reaffirms the school’s connections with an institutional past (retold in new narratives) and a commitment to continual growth consistent with the original vision, as well as new exigencies. In this way, the counter-narratives from Spelman’s past become, for institutional insiders and supporters, its dominant narrative.
Both annually and over time, and in concert with the learning legacies of Spelman women’s prior self-representations, Founders Day also taps into the race-based heritage of African American performances aimed at social agency. As outlined by Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent*, her study of *Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*, African Americans can point back to and presumably capitalize on race-based approaches for “translating alienation into self-actualizing performance” as part of a strong “literary tradition” facilitating positive “identity formation” (3). Brooks explores what she calls a “motley crew” (6) of transatlantic African American performers—figures ranging from Henry Box Brown to Adah Isaacs Menken to Aida Overton Walker—and subgenres ranging from whole-troupe song and dance performances to scenic panoramas and highly individualized characterizations. Brooks uses a different chronological framework and geographic range than I have here, and her cases are drawn from cross-racial rather than intraracial performances like those currently enacted in the college’s chapel each year. Her study nonetheless suggests how African American performance texts from the past (whether in print or embodied, as on a stage) have laid the groundwork for the performances still going on at Spelman every spring. In both contexts, as in Founders Day events in other HBCU settings, we find “aesthetic experimentalism” countering what might otherwise be “political marginalization”; with purposeful and sustained “cultural innovation,” all these race-oriented performances have “envisioned a way to transform the uncertainties of (black) self-knowledge directly into literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation” (Brooks, 3).

So, using Brooks’s model to complement my focus on counter-narrative formations, we can highlight continuities between the storytelling in the early *Messenger* (nurturing both institution-wide and individual agency) and the yearly performances rearticulating that cultural work. Specifically, performances for Founders Day in the year I attended clearly positioned the singular institutional history of Spelman as a counter-narrative resisting the dominant pattern of white-oriented higher education in US culture, which tends to erase racial identity as a constructive learning force. Accordingly, in revisiting the 2011 performance text below, I will spotlight that year’s rhetorically pragmatic remix of specific narrative elements from the *Messenger*-archived stories of Spelman’s founding students with current-day reaffirmations of their relevance as learning legacies resisting black women’s political marginalization. Celebrating these legacies together, in
a spirit my TCU English Department colleague Professor Stacie McCormick has aptly compared to “the black church where performances were designed to promote a sense of communal celebration and intimacy,” the insider audience members at a Spelman Founders Day event both claim their past heritage and envision a shared future of social agency.

Founders Day for April 2011, like all the annual performances over the years, took place in Sisters Chapel. The printed program signaled the event’s identity-affirming goals in a visual design with a double-opening fold-over format. Lifting the flap on the left side (which on the outside read “Spelman” and “The Sustaining Vision”) revealed a picture of Packard and Giles above a brief account of their collaboration with Quarles to open a school “in the church basement with 11 students, some of whom were not far removed from slavery, and all eager to learn.” Opening the flap on the right side (where “College” appeared above “130 Years and Leading”) uncovered a short biography of “Honorary Degree Recipient Tina McElroy Ansa,” a role model from the Spelman class of 1971. In its visual rhetoric, with its left panel hearkening back to the “Vision” of the founding women and their original community partners, and its right panel suggesting how “130 Years and Leading” were embodied in the example of Ansa, the printed program recalled discursive strategies already evident in Messenger accounts of the earliest Founders Day celebrations. In both cases, the original alumnae from “the church basement” appeared alongside stories of the institution’s continuing cultural work.

Like the Packard-Giles and Ansa profiles, the center-section listings for various elements in the performance itself also echoed details in Founders Day accounts from Spelman’s first decades. Reminiscent of the first teachers’ intentional valuing of student authorship in the early Messenger’s pages, numerous segments of the program carried such designations as “Written by Ebonee Holyfield, C’2010” for a scene entitled “The Gates” and “Written and Performed by” a group of then-current students for “Great Firsts.” The tradition of bringing alumnae back to campus—both to honor their contributions and to provide inspiring examples—reappeared in the names and graduation years for various performers, from Ansa to “Cynthia Jackson, C ’81” and “Adrienne Joi Johnson, C ’85.” Once the performances began, learning legacies from the Messenger and other sources became even more evident. As in the earliest institutional anniversaries, music merged with testimonials: backward-looking vignettes revisited key moments in the institution’s history, including the meeting of the Packard-Giles duo...
with Father Quarles, the shift from school to seminary to college, and a series of “Great Firsts” (specific institutional and individual achievements linked to Spelman’s identity).

Due to the chapel’s limited space, only seniors, freshmen, and special guests attended; others could watch on closed-circuit television, and students with whom I spoke during a postperformance picnic had certainly done so. From the processional of upper-class women in the robes they would soon wear for graduation to the march-in of their younger “sisters,” wearing white dresses, to the closing recessional, the packed student audience participated actively, joining in songs and frequently shouting out in response to appealing scenes.

Several vignettes made direct reference to the institution’s heritage, while along the way recapitulating rhetorical moves evident in early Messenger anniversary stories. For instance, “Spelman Testimony” presented two singers and four speakers representing “The Granddaughters Club,” whose speeches underscored the practice of legacy-making. A duet opened the segment, with the singers urging the audience, “Look at me. I am a testimony.” Then, the four speakers avowed, in sequence, “I am a testimony. Every Spelman student is a testimony,” “Every alumna is a testimony,” and “This ritual is a testimony.” Saluting their own “testimony of prayers answered,” they echoed the language of both founding figure Quarles and the original students, who had so often cited the opening of the school in 1881 as the result of prayer. Further relating this theme of “testimony” to spiritual practices, later elements in this ensemble averred that Spelman’s early students’ learning built special capacities for “service,” just as Carrie Walls had argued in her Messenger stories.71 Directly recalling the founding moment after emancipation, the quartet declared: “I want my children to be educated.” By positioning such phrases in dialogue with scriptural language, this segment grounded Spelman’s origin in spiritual and intellectual principles still guiding the college while articulating a black counterpoint to the white-voiced testimonials necessary to the early Messenger.

The scene with Packard, Giles, and Quarles reconfirmed these themes. This exchange resonated with Brooks’s view that African American performances of the past sought to “transform the uncertainties of (black) self-knowledge directly into literal and figurative acts of self-affirmation” (3); the white bodies of Packard and Giles themselves underwent a “literal” transformation, as two black Spelman students took on the roles of the white women cofounders. Having hurried down the aisle from the back of
the chapel, suitcase in hand, the two teacher figures met up with a black male actor, Lumumba Seegers, playing Quarles. Dressed in period costume, the women introduced themselves as on “a mission” (Packard), since “God . . . told us,” according to the Giles character, to “educate his people.” In yet another echo of early Messenger accounts, Quarles responded: “There is a basement in the church, and you are welcome to use it.” Gazing out toward the audience, Packard asked: “Can you see it, Harriet? The Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary.” Through this reference to the “seminary” name, adopted originally to signal their school’s advanced curriculum, the performers invited the audience’s reconnection with Spelman’s foundational commitment to liberal arts learning, despite the admission, in dialogue just before, that American society had not made “provision” then for the education of black women. “I can see it,” the Harriet character predicted. “One day there will be hundreds of colored women making an impact on the world.”

Along related lines, Brooks’s astute analysis of the significance of dance and music in nineteenth-century black performance culture provides a useful framework for embracing, as the audience did, a later scene in the 2011 pageant: a cluster of students-playing-students in a jaunty ragtime-evocative dance. Textbooks in hand, smiling exuberantly as they circled the stage, this dancing troupe might have seemed tonally at odds with the preceding scenes’ serious recapitulation of foundational history. Yet, as Brooks has explained, traveling troupes of black musical performers like those putting on the In Dahomey show during the Gilded Age used just such high-spirited dancing to reconfigure outworn stereotypes of black minstrelsy into new forms combining “black entertainment culture and racial uplift politics” (Bodies, 215). As such, this scene provided an apt transition to others, when contemporary music would celebrate Spelman’s engagement with social needs today.

Soon after the dance scenes, a brief transition elicited shouts and applause when the audience saw a set of symbolic gates brought onstage, set up to mirror the actual gates now standing as a local landmark at the college entrance. Packard and Giles having passed through and then offstage, a Spelman woman of today entered and recited a cross-generational story of opening “Spelman’s historical gates” to leadership. This commitment, the student-actress declared, belonged to her entire family, since their time at Spelman always became a stepping stone to social agency: “immense and endless service.” Through her studies, she too would “leave behind the
words” that had, in the past, “cursed the very essence” of black womanhood. She would replace those constraints with a limitless range of possible identities, “walking into a legacy of Spelman women,” a legacy conferring “permission to create her own world.”

Consistent with this vision, a parade of students enacting various role models followed, accompanied by triumphant music. This march of student actresses portrayed each as claiming a different identity (e.g., physician, teacher, nurse) with its own pathway to agency. Significantly, the women’s costumes crossed historical periods. Reenacting learning legacies across time, the performers collectively embodied a Spelman Archive of continuous agency. To underscore this connection, the final figure who came onstage wore the white dress of current underclassmen and repeatedly invoked the “Spelman legacy.” She acknowledged the other actresses as, each one, a “first” (e.g., “the first black registered nurse” and “the first African American woman to pass the bar in Mississippi”). So, through story portraits reminiscent of early Messenger alumnae stories, this scene touted the college’s unique ability to prepare black women “to change the world.”

A series of songs, dances, and individual story-portraits then demonstrated the power of Spelman’s women to be world-class leaders. One of these segments recalled the artistic contributions of alumna Varnette P. Honeywood, whose colorful paintings flashed on a screen until one came alive in a dance with current students echoing figures in the painting, then positioning themselves within a large frame they carried onto the stage, a performative story portrait as vivid as the narratives about alumnae in the Messenger’s early decades. Students who had recently studied or done volunteer work abroad, in Africa and the Caribbean, also presented accounts of global learning and servant leadership recalling first-generation alumna Clara Howard, whose mission service had earlier been saluted as one of Spelman’s many “firsts.”

One of these reports closed with a poem celebrating both the speaker’s experiences in Panama and the ways Spelman prepared her to excel there. Echoing sentiments in lyrics from the early Messenger, she asserted: “we know where we’re going, / And we know where we’ve been.” By the time a choral reading led by Atlanta’s True Colors Theatre leader Kenny Leon and several recent alumnae claimed the stage, audience members had seen an array of success stories, all linked to Spelman’s learning legacies and their current reiterations. A final soaring anthem by guest artist Jennifer Holliday urged all to make a “Choice to Change the World.”
Figure 2.4. Story-portrait from the 130th anniversary Founders Day performance in 2011. Courtesy of the Spelman College Archives.
Spelman’s Storytelling in Current Context

While each year’s Founders Day brings its own topical focus, recurring themes emerge through the historical legacy of past Spelman women, as Beverly Daniel Tatum has noted. Near the end of her own presidential service in spring 2015, Tatum reflected on a question many had asked her: “What is your legacy?” She identified “milestones of progress, like more students traveling abroad or doing undergraduate research, more faculty positions,” and “a new and improved Read Hall.” However, she suggested, the “legacy” query also encouraged her to reconnect with Spelman’s first women leaders: “Sometimes I imagine how Spelman founders Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles might answer that question. They said they were building for 100 years, and they did.” Tatum speculated that the college’s founders would cite Spelman’s “pioneers in every field imaginable,” more than its historic buildings and other marks of progress. As examples, she catalogued successful alumnae, beginning with Nora Gordon and including the “first Black female physicians . . . in Georgia,” as well as “military leaders like Marcelite Harris Jordan, C’64,” and social “activists like Marian Wright Edelman, C’60, and Sarah Thompson, C’2006.” Tatum continued, “I think Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles would say that women like these were their legacy, their gift to the future,” since “an educator’s most important legacy” can best be framed with this query: “Who takes action because of the experience that has been provided? Who truly makes a choice to change the world?” Looking ahead, Tatum saluted the about-to-graduate class of 2015, 70 percent of whom had donated to a safety net for “their younger sisters” through an “emergency scholarship” fund. Said Tatum: “If I have a legacy to claim, I want it to be that one—that the women of Spelman have fully embraced their responsibility to support Spelman College and its future—the students who come after them—so that our living legacy will endure forever.”

I suspect Packard and Giles would smile if they could indeed see themselves cited in a twenty-first century president’s personal narrative. They might commiserate on the subject of fundraising as never-ending, pausing ruefully, perhaps, over the echoes of their own constant call for resources. But I think they would also cheer how Spelman’s own women are moving to the forefront of donors to be cultivated. What a distance this detail marks between the institution’s early years, when their own and their students’ rhetoric of progress had to take into account a far different social hierarchy. Then, black women’s leadership had to be positioned as an unex-
pected counter-narrative rather than the norm, despite the many ways they
did, in fact, already lead.

This contrast suggests one rationale behind what one of my academic
colleagues, after hearing a presentation based on this chapter, characterized
as “over-the-top” content in the annual Founders Day pageant. There is,
frankly, much to celebrate, not only in the accomplishments of Spelman’s
individual women but also in how far they’ve come, as a group, in claiming
access to agency. And Founders Day, as staged for an insider audience of the
college’s own community members, serves a crucial function of preparing
both performers and those witnessing their testimony in any given year to
face the far less supportive audiences for black women’s would-be agency
beyond the gates of the college. This identity-affirming dimension of the
event’s cultural rhetoric acknowledges that so many of the same challenges
facing black women (and men) of the founding generation remain in force.

Agency for African Americans is still clearly constrained by identity-
associated discourse constantly reiterated in dominant narratives across
our culture. In the weeks when I was drafting these very paragraphs, pro-
tests against racially linked assaults by police on black American citizens
in multiple cities conveyed a stark reminder that we are not living in a
postracial society. Michelle Alexander’s compelling study of The New Jim
Crow provides a potent academic counterpart to the “body-cam” and by-
stander videos of black bodies placed in terrifying jeopardy. These seem-
ingly never-ending events also help us understand the thoughtful, often
poignant, responses of black scholars resisting Kenneth Warren’s provoca-
tive suggestion, in What Was African American Literature?, that the Jim
Crow era’s white hegemony came to an end decades ago, so that a distinc-
tive literary category’s cultural intervention is no longer needed.

Indeed, at the intersection of race and gender, research by feminist
scholars from a range of disciplines confirms the staying power of nega-
tive images embedded in the narratives of black womanhood still evident
throughout our society. What are effective pedagogical strategies for
resisting these persistent narratives? One involves incorporating a com-
parative, global perspective to put the challenges facing African American
women in dialogue with others’ experiences. Along those lines, back in
1996, Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders reported on
a Spelman delegation’s participation in an international women’s confer-
ence in Beijing. Guy-Sheftall and Wallace-Sanders reflected on the need
to “better prepare our Black women students for the global, multicultural
world of the future in which people of color and women are the majority.” They speculated that developing such a global perspective might counter the ongoing “negativity directed at African-American women” which could otherwise leave “Spelman students . . . overwhelmed” (“Educating,” 212). After hearing similar “reports from feminist media-watch organizations” all over the world, the Spelman team was struck by the potential efficacy of studying negative representations comparatively, both to better understand phenomena like violence against women as transcultural and to forge networks of global leadership.81 By 2011, in the Founders Day presentations of student texts on “Global Experience” and the musical composition “Choice to Change the World,” I could see their commitment was bearing fruit.82 Meanwhile, on the domestic front, the gender-based solidarity represented by Spelman’s response to the charges cast against Bill Cosby by women from a range of backgrounds—specifically, the College’s suspension of the William and Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby Endowed Professorship—offered another striking example of the institution’s commitment to women’s agency. Coming soon after the New York magazine July/August 2015 cover featuring thirty-five of Cosby’s accusers, along with an empty chair suggesting the potential of other, as-yet unheard stories, Spelman’s decision to cut ties with Cosby reaffirmed its recognition that gender, as well as race, places black women’s bodies, and thus their spirits, in jeopardy.

In that vein, work by black feminist scholars like Tatum, Guy-Sheftall, and Wallace-Sanders also implicitly suggests a productive pathway for white teacher-scholars like me to support our black colleagues in cross-cultural, social justice-oriented efforts associated with the learning legacies explored in this chapter. For one thing, our identity position in the classroom gives us a potentially useful standpoint-based position from which to teach counter-narratives resisting the still-actively pernicious narratives depicting black women. As members of the (current) majority culture, when we teach cultural interventions like those of the early Spelman students writing for the Messenger and of performers revisiting that heritage in the Founders Day pageant, we acknowledge how value systems operate in a culture over time, but also how they can be resisted and revised. As a white educator, I cannot be accused of self-interestedly promoting my own racial identity when I affirm the cultural value of black texts by foregrounding them in my classroom. Rather, my inclusion of stories like those in the Messenger makes a different kind of value statement about them—one asserting literary merit, rhetorical complexity, and historical significance
beyond the personal. On another pedagogical front, I can draw on gender affiliation, particularly if I underscore intersectionality in the interpretations I encourage my students to produce.

I also have a potentially helpful role to play around extra-literary questions of social power. Similar to serving as a heterosexual ally promoting rights for students in the LGBTQ community by simple steps like posting a “Safe Space” flyer on my office door, or more complex ones like modeling inclusive language in my classroom, I can help build a more welcoming community for students of color at majority-white institutions like Kennesaw State and TCU. By teaching the learning legacies of Spelman’s heritage from a stance of appreciation, I affirm the position of black students in my classroom as belonging there. And these efforts are equally important for their hoped-for impact on white students. To illustrate in the concrete terms of syllabus construction—a site of action clearly available to all faculty—I make a value statement to all my students by positioning narratives from the Spelman Archive of this chapter next to the 1895 *Texas Poems* by Ida Jarvis, one of TCU’s early white women educators. And I extend the impact of that localized canon-making choice by thinking critically about how I can teach those texts comparatively, including highlighting white privilege inherent in the TCU-based woman writer of the same era as the *Messenger* authors. Emphasizing intersectionality, when juxtaposing poetry from early *Spelman Messenger* writers with Jarvis’s, I can counterbalance contrasts between the two settings based on racial differences with similarities in their authorial contexts, such as the self-conscious invocation of Christian identity in both places, as well as a parallel sense of gender boundaries being crossed in a progressive institutional setting.83

Further, by making sure that the Spelman-created texts are far from the only ones by women writers of color on my syllabus, I seek to avoid mere tokenism.84 I also invite guest lecturers into my classroom, colleagues whose epistemic privilege for speaking about women writers of color is stronger than my own. This move simultaneously asserts the multifaceted authority—the “belonging in place”—of such colleagues. Taken together, these admittedly small steps in the space of a single classroom will not, of course, make for big change. But I hope they help ensure that the intellectual and sociopolitical agency of women of color is embraced as a given, even at a majority-white institution, not a point of contention. Then my students, whatever their own racial/ethnic identity, will be better prepared to take on leadership in future projects like my colleague Deborah Mitchell
surely aspired to promote when she urged our KCAC team to study Spelman’s learning legacies in the first place.

Archive-Inspired Community Projects

Valuable as single-classroom and single-course pedagogical counter-narratives may be, positioning our work in larger community frameworks grounded in collaborative archival recovery can have a more widespread public impact. Take, for instance, the potential reach of a project like the Civil Rights Digital Library, which also draws on the complex archive of southern race relations through such artifacts as unedited news footage from television stations in Spelman’s Georgia home. Providing access to such resources invites teachers and community members in the Internet’s expansive community to create new learning legacies around civil rights history. Or consider the multiyear teaching enterprise of the Harriet Wilson Project. Its groundbreaking collection of multidisciplinary essays won critical acclaim for counter-narrative moves to correct the cultural record around Wilson’s place in New England culture. That collaboration has also reached out to nonacademic audiences by sponsoring statewide readership of Wilson’s own writing and creating a memorial statue in Milford, New Hampshire. Thus, as Eric Gardner has noted in Unexpected Places, the project has modeled how “a new regionalist approach to early African American literature can work to transform communities” while giving the field itself “a larger public presence.”85 Similarly, housed at my second institutional home of TCU and led by historian Max Krochmal, the “Civil Rights History in Black and Brown” project is creating a counter-narrative of multi-racial collaboration by gathering oral histories to complicate versions of a movement so often cast straightforwardly as a black/white conflict.

Public endeavors like these and KCAC’s “Educating for Citizenship” have benefited from grant budgets that, once they disappear, may leave participants sorely pressed to continue working at a broad community level. The websites and books originally generated during a funded phase of collaboration still endure, of course, providing resources that are just a click or a library checkout away. But the networks that initially collaborated to build those resources are themselves fragile communities, so that maintaining connections to produce more knowledge and facilitate sustained public activity together becomes more difficult over time. In that context, I’ve been glad that writing this chapter led me to revisit the website for Slater Elementary in Atlanta, and to find Deborah Mitchell now serving
as an instructional coach for other teachers, a more formal leadership role than when we first worked together in Spelman’s archive. Reconnecting with Deborah by phone, I was excited to hear about her work today, but also about ways our prior collaboration still contributes to it. Similarly, in the decade since Dave Winter wrote about his classes’ study of early Messenger authors, students mentored by him at Atlanta’s Grady High School earned numerous journalism honors—and Dave himself, now teaching in Texas, claimed well-earned awards for nurturing student publications. The leadership of K-12 teachers like Mitchell and Winter, who have devoted such productive careers to fostering the capabilities of so many students of color, is building another culture-shaping Archive enhanced by collaborations like those that founded Spelman.

Individually, even after moving from Georgia to Texas myself, I continued to engage with Spelman’s on-campus archive—in large part because Taronda Spencer advocated for my doing the additional research for this chapter. She pushed me to return to the college on multiple occasions; encouraged me to stretch my study of primary texts beyond the Messenger to a deeper reading of Packard’s personal papers; tracked down key documents to send me; and celebrated with me when I uncovered more writing by Nora Gordon in the archive of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions in Boston. When I suggested that Taronda herself should write about Packard, Giles, and the early Spelman students, she laughed and explained why she preferred being the finder, steward, and distributor of materials, leaving most of the writing to others.86

I say “most of” because Taronda did write to me.

She is gone now, like so many other Spelman alumnae referenced here, though certainly long before we would have hoped. She passed away suddenly at only fifty-four years of age. A heart attack took her with no warning in the spring of 2013, during that busy, hopeful season that every year included her excitement over Founders Day bringing Spelman history to life again, just as she was preparing to support the inevitable summer visits of scholars from all over the world to the ever-growing archive on the campus.

There is some small comfort in knowing I thanked her many times for her guidance. I particularly treasure a set of handwritten notes I made during one extended conversation on a late afternoon when we were alone in the archive. Taronda was explaining the rationale she saw behind the original choice to name Spelman’s in-house periodical the “Messenger”—how that designation surely held an aspirational connotation envisioning particular black audiences I hadn’t thought of at first, fixated as I was initially
on its function as a persuasive fundraising pipeline to white supporters. No, Taronda clarified, an even more important audience, from the start, was in rural black communities where future Spelman students lived, young girls like those attending schools taught by Carrie Walls and Nora Gordon in between their Spelman terms.

“Let me tell you what that really says,” I wrote at the top of this sheet of notes, as a quote with Taronda’s name beside the comment, to remind myself that there are always gaps in my tentative readings of individual archives and layered Archives of cross-cultural relationships, gaps I can only begin to fill when working collaboratively. Taronda’s “Let me tell you” comment reconfirmed my own limits as an interpreter and gently insisted that I listen attentively to voices speaking of experiences beyond my own. To collaborate most effectively, Taronda taught me, includes accepting that we bring different tools and understandings to shared work—and that we should embrace those differences if we want to make the most efficacious new knowledge possible together.

When I turn through pages in the file folder that bears Taronda’s name, I see typed, official-looking communiques on Spelman letterhead, giving various permissions across multiple years of shared scholarship. But I also find friendly emails identifying secondary sources I should consult, and Xeroxed artifacts she sent to me when she came across (or even sought out and then forwarded) specific items linked to this research. There’s a flyer that, her notation says, was “sent by Rev. Quarles & Baptist ministers” to recruit students for the original school opening in 1881. There’s another advertisement, giving the cost of enrolling in the early seminary as fifty cents, and half that price “for children under twelve.” Taronda’s notation this time directs me to notice that the “first students were older women and girls,” so that “partnership between founders & students” was “in some cases on peer level.”

I hope she thought of our connection as something of a partnership. I know it was surely not “on peer level,” because I could never achieve her quantity and nuance of knowledge about Spelman. But I am grateful indeed that she shared so much of it. And I hope my efforts to pass that learning legacy on here are worthy of her, and worthy of Messengers like Sarah Lay, who expressed a wish I have truly come to share: “That my work may speak well for Spelman,” its Archive, and all its students aspire to do.