“Shrinking at No Lofty Theme”: The Race Literature of Victoria Earle Matthews, Gertrude Mossell, and Katherine Tillman

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By speaking and writing about slavery and its aftermath, women’s rights, white on black violence, and efforts to uplift the race, a generation of African American women intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century undertook the task of presenting the hardships faced by, and the injustices committed against their race.\(^1\) During their lifetimes, Victoria Earle Matthews (1861-1907), Gertrude Bustill Mossell (1855-1948), and Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman (1870-?), as well as such contemporaries as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), Fannie Barrier Williams (1855-1944), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Amelia E. Johnson (1858-1922), Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859-1930), Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931), and Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), witnessed all or most of the following: the end of slavery, the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction periods, the end of a century, World War I, women’s suffrage, and the Harlem Renaissance. Although neglected and often suppressed, theirs were voices that needed to be heard. This essay focuses on essays, fiction, and poetry by the lesser-known figures Matthews, Mossell, and Tillman to illustrate the contributions of the larger chorus of women intellectuals, activists, and writers who were proponents of race literature.

These writers committed themselves to race literature, which is literature with a social and political function, its main goal being to record the past and offer a vision of the future. It was women’s literature with a pronounced focus on racial issues, and it was race literature with a decidedly feminist point of view. They had not only to fight the general neglect of the female voice but also to refute the racist representations of black women in American culture. Matthews’s, Mossell’s, and Tillman’s concern with race literature was two-fold. They wrote and spoke about it eloquently and persuasively while, at the same time, they also produced this literature themselves. The function of literature was foremost in their minds because, as Elizabeth McHenry rightly contends in her study of African American literary societies, “literature resurfaced as one of the practical tools black Americans envisioned using not only to reflect but also in fact to redefine themselves and their roles in the larger community” (188). Race literature thus became a tool that served specific purposes, foremost among them, of course, the deep need of these women to express their concerns and those of other black women.

When her mother was forced to flee the South, Victoria Earle Matthews, who was born a slave in Georgia in 1861, was taken to New York where she
became an active clubwoman, teacher, social welfare worker, short story writer, and journalist. Although she had very little formal education, she was well read and had learned the art of rhetoric and quickly mastered the intricacies of work at the various women’s organizations. She was active in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and established the White Rose Mission in New York, a social center for community women and children, offering shelter and protection to young women coming from the South in search of employment (Cash 760). With the desire to do practical, useful work, Matthews began to deliver dramatic and forceful lectures on such subjects as the political and social responsibilities of self-improvement. She demanded respect for Black women, their work, and their accomplishments (see Cash).

Gertrude Bustill was born in 1855 into a family of black Quakers who later became Presbyterians. She received an excellent education, taught in the public schools of Philadelphia, Camden, New Jersey, and Frankford, Delaware, and contributed essays to numerous journals. After her marriage to Dr. Nathan F. Mossell, a founder of the Douglass Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia under whose initials she published some of her work, and the birth of two daughters, she continued her career as a feminist, social reformer, and journalist (see Braxton, Terborg-Penn, Tate, Domestic Allegories, 132-4). The College Life or Practical Self-Educator: A Manual for Self-Improvement, an 1896 publication about college-educated African Americans, describes her as follows: “Mrs. Mossell has selected journalism as her profession, believing [...] that the future of women, especially of Afro-American women, is in this line of literary work. In her writings she deals particularly with women and the Afro-American race as a whole. She is alive to all the interests of our race; and since journalism is her mission, she is ever on the alert to ascertain some way in which to make it a success” (Northrop et al. 103).

Biographical data about Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman are less abundant. She was born in 1870, published several essays in the A.M.E. Church Review and the Voice of the Negro, a number of individual poems in the Christian Recorder, a collection of poetry called Recitations (1902), several plays, and short fiction, including Beryl Weston’s Ambition: The Story of an Afro-American Girl’s Life (1893), “Miles the Conqueror” (1894), Clancy Street (1898-99), and “The Preacher at Hill Station” (1903). The College Life or Practical Self-Educator states that she wrote her first poem at the age of thirteen and that “She was educated in the public schools of Louisville and the State University of that city. She may be regarded as one of the most gifted women of her race, possessing rare mental endowments, fine imagination and an excellent command of language” (102).

In 1895 Matthews was invited to participate in the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States, in Boston, a meeting of intelligent, educated, eloquent, and mostly middle-class women organized by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin to refute a notorious letter from John W. Jacks denigrating black women. Elizabeth McHenry identifies Jacks as the President of the Missouri
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Press Club, who, in a letter to a white clubwoman, degrades colored women as “prostitutes” and “natural liars and thieves” (362, n. 6). He was by no means alone in propagating such stereotypes. In her Primer of Facts, Pauline E. Hopkins quotes extensively from Mrs. Jeannette Robinson Murphy’s Southern Thoughts for Northern Thinkers, published in the Presbyterian Standard in 1903, in which she perpetuates the plantation school’s view of slavery as a benevolent institution and asserts that slave mothers routinely asked their masters to sell their own no-account children away from them (see Wallinger 124-125 and 309). Another – albeit extreme – example will suffice to establish the overall negrophobic attitude that some white women took to African American women. In an article titled “Experiences of the Race Problem,” “A Southern White Woman,” very similar to Murphy, portrays the racial hierarchy in the South as natural and unchanging: “Personally I never passed judgment upon them. So far as I knew God had done that when he made me white and them black. Naturally that fixed the basis of our relationship. I had an affection for them, but there was not the least conception of equality in it. I was not taught these race distinctions, I was born with them, and notice that they are intensified in each succeeding generation of white children” (Stein 592). The author elaborates in shocking terms her fear and hatred for colored men, regarding them as totally depraved and degenerate criminals but condemns African American women even more harshly, asserting that they “evidence more nearly the popular idea of total depravity than the men do. They are so nearly all lacking in virtue that the color of a negro woman’s skin is generally taken (and quite correctly) as a guarantee of her immorality” (Stein 593). She elaborates on this point as follows:

[Negro women] are evidently the chief instruments of the degradation of the men of their own race. When a man’s mother, wife and daughters are all immoral women, there is no room in his fallen nature for the aspiration of honor and virtue. He is bereaved of hope and a pride that even the worst white man always has to stimulate him to decency. I sometimes read of virtuous negro women, hear of them, but the idea is absolutely inconceivable to me. I do not deny they exist, but after living in a section all my life that teems with negroes I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman. (Stein 593)

Talking about colored students, the writer observes that most of them are mulattoes or octoroons “the offspring of negro women, but not of negro men” (Stein 594). Addressing further the issue of amalgamation, she observes: “Whatever this intimates of the Southern white man’s morals, it teaches two things clearly – that negro men are rarely the fathers of those individuals in the race who develop to any marked degree intellectually, and that negro women who are prostitutes are the mothers of these ambitious sons and daughters” (Stein 594).

Given that this article is one that reflects the widely held but less frequently printed sentiment of much of the white population in the post-Reconstruction era, it is no wonder that writers of Matthews’s, Mossell’s, and
Tillman’s generation had to defend themselves and pronounce their standards and values. It is in this context that the term race literature entails race apology and feminist manifesto. African American women writers had to define their identities in outspoken and intelligent ways so that they could be heard. However, because not all white Americans subscribed to such wholesale denigration of the entire black population, African American women were able to find the space and means to organize conferences, establish women’s clubs and missions, and publish their literary and journalistic writing in books and magazines.

At the 1895 conference, Matthews represented the Women’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn and was “arguably the most active” of the 104 delegates (Logan, *With Pen and Voice* 128). Speaking about “The Values of Race Literature,” a text that McHenry calls “the manifesto of the black women’s movement” (190), Matthews sees the production and dissemination of race literature as necessary to rebut the many negative stereotypes against African Americans in general and African American women in particular. She hails such writing as “the preserving of all the records of a Race,” and for “saving from destruction and obliteration what is good, helpful and stimulating” (144-5). In doing so she supports the position of Booker T. Washington that African Americans should look to the future with “helpful and stimulating” writing rather than concentrate on past wrongs. She also opposes dialect writing because it often perpetuates the stereotype of African Americans as subordinate servants.

As for the content of race literature, Matthews thinks that writers must “win a place by the simplicity of the story, thrown into strong relief by the multiplicity of its dramatic situations; the spirit of romance, and even tragedy, shadowy and as yet ill-defined, but from which our race on this continent can never be dissociated” (131). Although she admits that there are as yet not too many distinctive texts, she offers a list of writers including Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Frances Harper, who constitute a nascent African American literature. By pointing out the inherent worth, heroism, and nobility of their black and mixed-race protagonists, these writers seek to refute stereotypes and improve race conditions. At the same time, Matthews says, writers must meet certain standards and their writing requires modesty and judiciousness: “True culture in Race Literature will enable us to discriminate and not to write hasty thoughts and unjust and ungenerous criticism often of our superiors in knowledge and judgement” (145). Adhering to the general principles of the club movement, she sees women playing an important part in this project: “When living up to her highest development, woman has done much to make lasting history, by her stimulating influence and there can be no greater responsibility than that, and this is the highest privilege granted to her by the Creator of the Universe” (146).

In addition to defining the character and subject of race literature, Matthews identifies it as distinctly American. The indisputable fact of the unequal
treatment of the American Negro leads to a literature that “will of necessity be different in all essential points of greatness, true heroism and real Christianity” from American literature (129). Speaking not long before the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, Matthews designates blacks as “typical” Americans and yet separate from their white counterparts: “We are the only people most distinctive from those who have civilized and governed this country, who have become typical Americans, and we rank next to the Indians in originality of soil, and yet remain a distinct people” (130). For her, race literature is the vehicle to convey “the unnaturally suppressed inner lives which our people have been compelled to lead” (131). The questions of how and to what extent African American and mainstream American literature differ continue to engage critics of African American and ethnic literature to this day.

Matthews contrasts her conception of race literature with that implicit in texts that engage issues of race by white writers such as Washington Irving, Mark Twain, John Ridpath, William Dean Howells and Arthur Conan Doyle. She talks about Howells’s “tortuous jugglery of words” (134) and questions his status as a “littérature, diplomat, journalist, altruist?” (135). She takes her lead here from an article in Anna Julia Cooper’s The Voice from the South, in which Cooper terms Howells’s novel An Imperative Duty “an insult to humanity and a sin against God” for its “sweeping generalizations of a race [based] on such meager and superficial information” (203). Nevertheless, Matthews’s words were brave words coming as they did in Howells’s Boston at a well-publicized conference.

Matthews calls upon her generation of black women to produce their own literature and, as Shirely Wilson Logan puts it in "We Are Coming," “demonstrate their own intellectual potential to skeptical readers” (137). At the same time, Matthews points out the unrecognized influence of African American topics, characters, and plots on white writing. In this effort to highlight the contributions of people of African descent to world literature, she is joined by Tillman who published an article about “The Negro Among Anglo-Saxon Poets,” in which she reads Shakespeare’s Othello and points out Africanist tropes in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and A.T. Worden as well as writing about Alexander Dumas, Père, and Alexander Sergeivich Pushkin as authors of African descent.

In “The Values of Race Literature,” Matthews programmatically proposes that African American authors should intensify their “thoughtful, well-defined and intelligently placed efforts” to inform Americans in accurate terms about the lives of black people (136). Although her speech lacks a political call to action against wrongs committed, it acknowledges the need to subtly manipulate public sentiment in favor of a more nuanced picture of the African American through race literature.

The texts of most black writers of that period reflect tensions between accommodation and rebellion, racial solidarity and elitism, disapproval of negative stereotyping and celebration of black perseverance. Although Mat-
thews rejects the denigrating “darkey” image, she praises the “happy, hopeful, enduring character” (128) of the African American and his profound sense of Christian forgiveness. Critics are tempted to group the intellectuals of that time into either the more conservative Booker T. Washington camp or the more politically radical group associated with W.E.B. Du Bois. But the distinctions are not always so clear-cut. Matthews, for example, has a strong sense of the proper role of women and sees the need to forgive the sins of the past, but she is definitely a politically active woman and a strong supporter of Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching campaigns.

In 1897 Matthews delivered a more optimistic speech, “The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman,” at the Annual Convention of the Society of Christian Endeavor in San Francisco, which was a “Protestant, interdenominational young people’s movement established in 1881” (Logan, With Pen and Voice 123). When seen in its proper context, what we now might be tempted to read as a rather conservative appeal to protect women and keep them in their proper places was at that time a radical call to grant them the same rights as white women. Matthews addressed a mainly white group of young Christian men and women and this definitely tempered her tone and feminist and racial rhetoric. She sees the awakening of the African American woman as one of “the most promising facts in our national life” (154), asserting that progress has been made since emancipation: “The auction block of brutality has been changed into the forum of reason, the slave mart has been replaced by the schoolroom and the church” (150). Her metaphors of growth, of night and day, of homebuilding, and of salvation through Christianity are carefully chosen to address her white audience’s lack of knowledge about slavery and prejudices about the morality of black women. Besides former slave women’s achievements as breadwinners, church women, educators and clubwomen, Matthews emphasizes their great accomplishment in making “a home for [their] race, an abiding place for husband, and son, and daughter” (153). Her argumentative rhetoric culminates in a call for American society to abandon unjust marriage and divorce laws, end segregated transportation, establish homes for the elderly, the sick, the outcast, and the orphaned, and reform the prison system: “I appeal to the Christian sentiment which dominates this organization, to assist us in righting the wrongs growing out of these regulations, to the end that our womanhood may be sustained in its dignity and protected in its weakness” (155).

Whereas Matthews’s essays are sharp, well-informed, straightforward answers of a public speaker to the negative portrayal of black women, her fiction displays a more private and intimate side of this outspoken defender of the rights of women. Under her pen name Victoria Earle, Matthews published several works of fiction, among them “Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life.” It concerns an old black nurse, Aunt Lindy, into whose care is entrusted the victim of a great fire. She nurtures the man back to health even after she recognizes him as her former master who sold her children away from her. The
desire for vengeance and bitter hatred, however, are seen as temptations that a true Christian spirit has to conquer. The faithfulness and loving care of the old woman might be difficult to accept from a modern point of view, but it was felt to be necessary in Matthews’s time to demonstrate the race’s potential for forgiveness and superior moral sentiment. “Aunt Lindy” exemplifies an ideal shared by her fellow black women intellectuals. Tillman singles it out in her “Afro-American Women and Their Work” (87). Comparing it to Harper’s novel Iola Leroy and Anna Julia Cooper’s collection of essays A Voice from the South, both published in 1892, Mossell praises it in “A Sketch of Afro-American Literature”: “Only the race itself knows its own depth of love, its powers of forgiveness. In the heart of this race, if the American nation will only see it, they have the truest type on earth of forgiveness as taught by the Redeemer of the world” (64).

Written with compassion and pathos, Matthews’s “Zelika – a Story,” published in the A.M.E. Church Review in 1892, narrates the life and death of a cruel plantation owner, Robert Claiborne, whose granddaughter Valerie is given the beautiful slave Zelika “in much the same way as a Northern mother would give her child a doll” (73). Zelika is loved by a strong and faithful slave, known as “King George” because of his “reputed royal ancestry in the be-nighted fatherland,” “proud bearing,” and reputation for “native wisdom and resource” (873). The characters of this “legend” are larger than life: the giant and brave hero King George; the wicked, fearsome tyrant Claiborne; and the beautiful, soft, forbearing, and deeply Christian heroine Zelika, who is, at one point, compared to Penelope waiting for her Ulysses (76). As with many stories of this period, it turns out that Zelika is Claiborne’s own daughter by his slave Miriam, who was killed protecting Claiborne from a bullet. On his death bed, when General Sherman is at the gates of Atlanta, Claiborne leaves a note for Zelika telling her where to find a buried treasure. With true Christian patience, Zelika suffers through the difficult end of the war and faithfully waits for King George’s return before she opens this letter, whereupon they find the treasure and leave the South.

Another little-known story by Matthews, “Eugenie’s Mistake,” published in the A.M.E. Church Review in 1891, tells of a beautiful youngheiress to a Southern estate who is found to possess a drop of black blood. She flees to France where she is educated and is joined there after five years by her husband who then reveals to her that he himself is also of African descent. While the story uses some of the predictable elements of passing literature, such as hinting at the color of the two protagonists and a series of misunderstandings and intrigues, it does not contain the usual melodramatic scene of revelation in which the hero or heroine laments belonging to the black race. Instead, when Eugenie finds out her ancestry, there is no word about the social consequences for herself; her only thought is how she can protect her young husband and spare him the supposed shame of her color.
“Aunt Lindy,” “Zelika,” and “Eugenie’s Mistake” concentrate on the resourcefulness and innate nobility of slaves, former slaves, and their descendants. They do not directly condemn white Southern slaveholders. Instead, they emphasize reversals of fortunes: the former master who depends on the good will of his former slave, the slave master who is abandoned by all his family except for the one daughter whom he has never acknowledged as such, and the cruel separation of a married couple because of anti-miscegenation laws. Although the theme of Christian forgiveness makes her fiction appropriate for church publications, the wrongs of slavery do not go unacknowledged. It is the cruelty of the slave system that bring about the reversals of fortunes. Despite the pivotal position she holds in this generation of eloquent women because of her advocacy of race literature, Matthews’s own fiction is less well known and less readily available than that of her contemporaries.

In their articles and creative writing, Mossell and Tillman propagate ideas similar to those of Matthews. In “A Sketch of Afro-American Literature,” published in 1894 as part of The Work of the Afro-American Woman, Gertrude Mossell raises some fundamental questions about the nature of Afro-American literature: “The intellectual history of a people or nation constitutes to a great degree the very heart of its life. To find this history, we search the fountainhead of its language, its customs, its religion, and its politics expressed by tongue or pen, its folklore and its songs” (48). Because for a long time the African American could make no law nor write his own history, Mossell contends, “he could only protest against the injustice of his oppressors in his heart, in his song, and in his whispered consolations to the suffering and dying” (49). Oral history is thus a reliable source of information. At the same time, literature is history and reflects the three great happenings in the African American past: the middle passage, which is described by Mossell as “the separation from native land and friends, and later arrival in this land of forced adoption” (48); slavery, a period Mossell calls “two hundred years of bondage and oppression mitigated only through the hope thrown upon life’s pathway by the presence of hundreds of freemen of the race eking out an existence hampered on all sides by caste prejudice” (48-9); and life after emancipation, which she calls a type of freedom and citizenship “defrauded of its substance by every means that human ingenuity could devise” (49). Mossell’s tone here is by no means conciliatory. She sees race literature as useful for not only the writers, but present and future readers because it offers a distinctively African American version of history.

As Joanne Braxton points out in her introduction to the Schomburg edition of The Work of the Afro-American Woman, Mossell replaces the ideal of the true woman as pious, obedient, and subservient, with the concept of a “noble womanhood” that includes the humble workers and housewives as well as the more public orators and clubwomen such as Ida B. Wells (47). Mossell is of the firm opinion that women writers of her time and race should assume the role of pioneers as to their subject matter and be self-consciously feminist. It is
this latter idea that makes Mossell of particular interest to the modern critic. For example, in “The Opposite Point of View” she offers an early criticism of the idea that the care and responsibility for a happy home relies solely on women and in “A Lofty Study” she anticipates Virginia Woolf by asserting that a woman writer needs to have a room of her own.

*The Work of the Afro-American Woman* includes a number of poems, most of which are four-line, four-stress, end-stopped and full of anaphora and alliteration, much in the style of Longfellow and Whittier. They typically concern love between mother and child, married bliss, Christian love earned and dearly gained, the failure of love, the death of a beloved person, and the cycle of life ending in loss. These poems provide readers with a reassuring message of divine justice. They are less feminist than Mossell’s prose works, their chief aim being to refute the black women’s reputed deficiency in personal character and moral values. Without being explicitly feminist, a few poems are nevertheless outspoken and overtly political, such as “Tell the North That We Are Rising” and “Child of the Southland.” Although the bosom of the child of the latter is “Reeking with venom” (4), his (or her) bright future will entail access to “the promised land” (22). These poems demonstrate the tension between Mossell’s need to foster a sense of solidarity among African Americans and her belief that African Americans should take combative action in order to obtain equality. The latter two poems also hint that white America can not rely on the ever-lasting meekness of the former slaves.

Like her contemporaries, Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman undertakes a revisionist history with the aim of firmly establishing the valuable, resourceful, intelligent, and artistic contributions of African American women. She begins her essay “Afro-American Women and Their Work,” originally published in the *A.M.E. Church Review* in 1895, by stating “Woman has always had a mission in the world” (70). After enumerating women of historical significance, such as Cleopatra, Heloise, and Joan of Arc, she shifts swiftly – and logically – to the African American slave women, whom she calls heroic and worthy. Tillman describes the hard work of field and house slaves and their suffering at the hands of cruel masters and mistresses and points out their spiritual distress due to a lack of Christian training. She cites the example of Stowe’s Uncle Tom to illustrate that an innate sense of Christian forbearance and spirituality comes naturally to slaves and they have the ability and longing to accept religion. Tillman then lists the accomplishments of particular African American women in the fields of religion, art, medicine, elocution, journalism, writing, domestic service, and homemaking. She praises every group because black women’s achievements in each of these fields disprove those who “are continually on the outlook for the darkest side of life” (89). Tillman ends with plea for uplifting the race through the work of women: “Let us Afro-American women pledge ourselves to the elevation of our home. Let us war against in-temperance, against infidelity, against gambling in saloons and parlors, against
bad literature and immorality of all kind, for these are the demons that destroy our homes” (92).

As Claudia Tate states in her introduction to the Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman, a reader schooled in the rhetoric of twentieth-century racial protest fiction will find “that complex issues of race (such as alienation, the extensiveness of institutionalized racism, and intraracial discrimination) are either unrealistically depicted or missing altogether” (53) from Tillman’s texts. Much like her contemporaries, Tillman, who mainly published in the A.M.E. Church Review and the Christian Recorder, had to reconcile the spirit of Christian patience expected by and from the readers of these church magazines and the call to arms against racial discrimination that she knew was needed. Similar to Amelia E. Johnson she chose a partly sentimental mode to address her readers. Tate describes her novellas as “female narratives of domestic ideality” that “outline ideal patterns of male and female ego formation as well as racial individuation and socialization through the configuration of a black female protest” (54). It would be wrong, however, to assume, in the light of the more outspokenly racialized novels of her male contemporaries Charles W. Chesnutt and Sutton E. Griggs, that this is simply and only the result of a gender predilection for domestic rather than political issues. Chesnutt and Griggs also concentrate on the family as the background of inter- and intraracial strife. Two exemplary tales of self-help through good behavior and education and several poems about a mythologized South and the hardships of women demonstrate Tillman’s strategy of disguising her political and social agenda.

Published in the A.M.E. Church Review in two installments (July and October 1893), “Beryl Weston’s Ambition: The Story of an Afro-American Girl’s Life” chronicles the development of bright and ambitious Beryl, who wants to become a teacher of modern languages and higher mathematics. When her mother suddenly dies, she has to abandon her college career and stay at home to work not only for her family but also for her friends and the community. In her work she is supported by Dr. Warren, a physician who has been reunited with his mother – the village nurse – from whom he was separated as a slave child. Beryl also finds religion with the help of the young minister Harold Griswold. The encounter between these two admirable male characters leads to a discussion of the race problem, a stock ingredient in much fiction of that time. This exchange functions, as Claudia Tate says in Domestic Allegories of Political Desire, as “discursive displacement” enabling a writer to avoid direct criticism of racism by putting criticism into the mouth of fictional characters (200).

The gender issue at the heart of this novella is Beryl’s refusal to marry the minister because life with him would limit her ambition to become a writer. Her eventual marriage to Dr. Warren has to be read as her reward for an exemplary life in the service of her family and friends because it enables her to travel extensively and even serve as a teacher for some time, which suggests that virtuous role models for future generations of young women, such as
Beryl, will be rewarded with a fulfilling life despite the limited opportunities available to them.

As it is for Beryl, education serves as the key to success for the hero in Tillman’s story “Miles the Conqueror” (1894). In tone and mood this story is typical of much writing of this period. Its message is that an African American, however poor and uneducated he may be, needs to strive for education and gain the respect of his peers by exceptional dedication to his studies, sweetness of mind and exemplary behavior. The eponymous hero of this tale – in true Booker T. Washington fashion – begs for admission into a college and works his way through school, eventually winning the affection of one of the most racist and race-conscious white students by nursing him through a dangerous illness. His reward is respect, friendship, and honor. Like Matthews’s Aunt Lindy and Zelika, Miles is deeply religious, and like Beryl he is determined to be educated. The message in these tales and many of the poems is not simply that religious forbearance and faith will bring social and professional success, but that an inherent nobility of mind and character will win respect despite racial difference and a general climate of prejudice and discrimination. These stories and poems offer the vision of a better future, highlight the greatness, heroism, and true Christianity of African Americans, and win their place through the spirit of romance and tragedy that Matthews, as shown above, designates as key ingredients of race literature.

Tillman’s poetry covers themes ranging from the slave past, notable black men and women, everyday family life, and the academic and religious education of young people. Most of them were collected in Recitations, originally published by the A.M.E. Book concern in Philadelphia in 1902. Dickson D. Bruce cites Recitations as a collection typical of its time because it contains dialect poems “hand-in-hand with verse that deal[s] with black heroism and that bitterly excoriate[s] American prejudice” (111). The juxtaposition of poems in various registers enables Tillman to express an understanding of the need of the former slaves to see meaning in their past suffering and at the same time to “place” that need in a critical context.

Protest against injustice and wrongdoing permeates Tillman’s poetry. A typical example is “America’s First Cargo of Slaves,” in which slave transportation is called “America’s dark shame” (195). In “Clotelle – A Tale of Florida,” a young fair-skinned slave woman is in love with a dark and stately “prince of olden days” (156), but her master, predictably, forbids this union because he himself lusts after the beautiful slave: “You love Pierre, you say – my servant; / You prefer my slave to me, / Your love will but prove his ruin; / Never thou his bride wilt be” (157). Pierre is hanged and Clotelle, the “sweet maiden,” drowns herself and thus demonstrates the depth of feeling that was so often reputed to be lacking in slave women. In “Our Cause” Tillman laments white people’s lack of support for African American causes. In other poems she honors the courage and contributions of Phillis Wheatley, Ida B. Wells, African American religious leaders, and black soldiers.
Tillman’s dialect poems stress a mythologized past, praise the admirable qualities of the men and women she depicts, and thus work against the image of savage black males and immoral black women (see Sherman 12-13). They are memorable because of the loving tribute they pay to the common heroes and heroines of black history and contemporary life. “Uncle Ned’s Story” concerns an old farm slave, Uncle Ned, whose slave wife Chloe refused to leave the plantation after emancipation. In bitterness and scorn Uncle Ned reports about her staying back while he went off fighting and how, when he came home, he found her dead, buried beside her mistress. “Seeking the Lost” is a moving recollection of an old former slave searching for his family. In “Sen’ Me Back to de Souf,” an old father asks his daughter, with whom he lives in the North, to let him spend his Christmas holidays in the warm South with his folks: “You’ve tried quite hard since I’ve been heah / To mek me feel young lak an’ gay, / But nothin’ meks it seem lak home” (173). In “When Mandy Combs Her Head” (reminiscent of Dunbar’s more famous “When Malindy Sings”), a young African American girl gives very careful attention to her hair. A very intelligent young person, “And she’s got her books down fine; / She can figure like a lawyer, / And read Latin, line for line” (160), she nevertheless exaggerates her efforts to straighten out her hair and despairs about its unruliness. Tillman beautifully handles the black vernacular in these poems. Her voice is one of understanding and loving care. She does not ridicule the father who wants to go home South nor the bright girl who does not know what to do with her hair nor the deeply felt faith of former slaves in such poems as “Uncle Ike’s Testimony.” Her aim is to demonstrate the needs and virtues of the common people, giving them the grace and dignity of finely turned verse.

From a modern perspective, arguably her most memorable poems are those written to and about women because they reflect a remarkable awareness of gender solidarity among women of all classes. In “She Who Never Had a Chance,” a female speaker looks back on her life of shame, need, and lovelessness. Driven into a sinful mode of living through poverty and deprivation, she awaits an early death at the age of forty-three. She asks for tolerance from women, such as “[t]he heartless coquette, the unfaithful wife” (177), who are spared an existence such as hers even though they have not lead exemplary lives themselves. When she concludes that “They’d never think of helping a woman like me” (177), this is a plea to the leading women of the race not to disdain the so-called fallen members of their sex.

“Bashy” addresses the subject of intraracial prejudice. It is about a young black girl who has no opportunities in life because she is too dark and is looked down upon not only by white but also by black people. Even the man she loves does not marry her because of her dark skin. Bashy dies, an all too common fate, causing the speaker to ask: “Oh, women and men of the Negro Race, / Can we not raise above color of face? / Teach our girls that the worst disgrace / Is blackness of life, not blackness of face!” (175) More than the other poems, this poem spells out the ideals of the women’s club movement: “Lift the women up
and the race ascends; / Let the women go down, and our progress ends” (175). Mixed with her dialect poems and those about heroism, “She Who Never Had a Chance” and “Bashy” subtly express a radical political and social message and add to the wide array of topics the author addresses. In her writing Tillman carefully balances content and topic, moving between uplift rhetoric in her essays and plays and an outspoken and personal voice in her poetry. Carefully embedded in her dialect and heroism poems, these two poems “disguise,” as said earlier, a radical political and social message and enrich the wide array of topics, the great depth of knowledge of and interest in current affairs that Tillman displays in her writing. She carefully balances content and topic, moving between the the uplift rhetoric in her essays, plays, and some poems and an outspoken and personal voice in her poetry.

The black women intellectuals and writers of the Post-Reconstruction era answered Matthews’s call “to form habits of observation and commence to build a plan for posterity by synthesis, analysis, […] aiming and striving after the highest” (“Value” 144). Despite African Americans’ growing hardships, for Matthews “the outlook for Race Literature” (146) was never brighter. Matthews, Mossell, and Tillman exemplified their generation’s race consciousness. “Shrinking at no lofty theme, shirking no serious duty, aiming at every possible excellence, and determined to do their part in the future uplift of the race” (145), as Matthews herself puts it, these women and others of their ilk embraced race literature as a mode of self-definition and thereby provided inspiring models for coming generations.

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1 See Shirley Wilson Logan’s summary in “We Are Coming”: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women, 3.

2 This was part of a series of articles published in The Independent in 1904, comprising “The Race Problem – An Autobiography” by a Southern Colored Woman, “Experiences of the Race Problem” by a Southern White Woman, “Observations of the Southern Race Feeling” by a Northern Woman, and “A Northern Negro’s Autobiography” signed by Fannie Barrier Williams. All of them are were republished in Leo Stein’s Fragments of Autobiography.

3 This story was first printed in The A.M.E. Church Review 5 (January 1889), 246-50. It was printed in hard cover as a separate volume in 1893 by J.J. Little & Company, Astor Place, New York City (see Tate, Domestic Allegories, n 18, 260). It is available as a hypertext at http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cUSWW/VEM/AL.html
4 The following poems are from Recitations. They are identified by the page numbers in the Schomburg edition. See Tate’s Introduction for more detailed interpretations (34-42).

Works Cited


—. “Miles the Conqueror.” Tillman 247-50.

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