Ethiopia’s woke women

“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (Psa. 68:31) was a biblical verse invoked by nineteenth-century African American women from Maria W. Stewart to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. It expressed the hope for Emancipation, for the redemption that awaited those who had suffered and sorrowed. It foreshadowed the retribution in store for those who had kidnapped, sold, and enslaved other human beings. In nineteenth-century American culture, images of Africa, like public perceptions about African American women, were both sympathetic and cruel, connoting oppositional and often absurd meanings. Africa was imagined as menacing and wild, a burden to the orderly, Christian West, or as a lush, uncultivated, Edenic paradise relieved of civilization’s inhibitions and constrictions.

Influential literature anthologies edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Teresa C. Zackodnik, and Hollis Robbins and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have depicted a vibrant literary scene in which Black women opined about Africa and themes of race, gender, class, and community. Generative research by Andréa N. Williams, Shirley Moody-Turner, Joycelyn Moody, Noliwe M. Rooks, Sarah Ruffing Robbins, Eric Gardner, Kimberly Blockett, and Crystal J. Lucky has been attuned to nineteenth-century Black women’s submissions to and editorships of periodicals and serials. Such scholars have mined local and regional archives housing Black women’s print productions, and they have paid attention to sacred and secular spaces as sites of Black women’s art. This chapter examines how and why the later nineteenth-century writings of Gertrude Emily Hicks Bustill Mossell (1855–1948) and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), and additional Black women’s literary productions, press back against enslavers’ and colonizers’ caricatures of Africa and African people. At times they may seem to buy into stereotypes, yet they also invoke the continent to express the specific conditions of Black women’s lives: their relationships to their family members and communities; their sense of themselves as intellectuals, educators, and advocates; and their roles as citizens and leaders.

Competing notions of Africa in nineteenth-century Black women’s writings and speech

African American women writing after the Reconstruction telegraphed contradictory messages about Africa. They reflected antipodal attitudes towards the continent held throughout
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the United States and Britain. From the American antislavery movement, to Emancipation and Reconstruction, to the post-Reconstruction decades, they bundled oppositional meanings in their thoughts about Africa: intellect and savagery, authority and surrogacy, fecundity and lack, potentiality and despair.

During the antislavery movement, many antebellum African Americans had embraced the idea of repatriation to Africa in light of a nation that seemed at first too quick to roll back the freedpeople’s protections and too committed, after Emancipation, to maintaining an uncompensated, involuntary, abused labor force. They were receptive to Black leaders such as Martin Henry Freeman (1826–89), president of Liberia College, who advised them to come to the continent. They could “bring up their children to be men and not creeping things.” Like Huck Finn lighting out to freedom in the West at the conclusion of his Adventures to escape his Aunt Sally’s cloying attempts to civilize him (Twain 1912, 405), they were all for sailing east to Liberia’s vistas of land, liberty, and self-governance in order to escape America’s racism and anti-Black violence.

Founded in 1817, the American Colonization Society (ACS) kitted out voyages of free or manumitted African Americans to Monrovia, Liberia. Yet its motives were a mixed bag. Anxieties about bloody revolts of the enslaved against enslavers, and fears that racial intermarriage would corrode pure white bloodlines and diminish their physical and intellectual vitality, inspired the ACS to action as much as benevolence. Matthew Spooner writes that its “rhetoric and premise – that black Americans do not belong in this country – were overtly racist and deserving of the derision … heaped upon the ACS since its inception.” The ACS, according to Spooner, reflected discordant strains that pitted a growing free Black populace against free white Americans and gestured towards gradual abolition but were ineffective in achieving it. These tensions notwithstanding, by the eve of the Civil War, an estimated 120,000 Black people had made the trek to Liberia.

Replacing this goal of departure with the resolution to stay put, a discourse about the American Revolution appeared in African Americans’ antislavery literature. While unable to prove direct connections between family members and the Revolution, African American women such as Harriet A. Jacobs (1813–97) cited this war to demonstrate their people’s hard-earned place here in the United States where they had fought it. Maria W. Stewart (1803–79), opposed to colonization, instead reminded African American audiences that “we sprang from a scientific people.” Addressing Black women frequently, exuberantly, as “daughters of Africa” and “Afric’s daughters,” she urged them to aspire to public roles as intellectuals and educators.

Similar crosscurrents coursed during and after antislavery days, from abolition to Emancipation to Reconstruction, as the project of countering negative racial policies, attitudes, and stereotyping continued. Black women and men who identified as patriotic, Protestant Americans claimed without irony two opinions at once. They assented to the idea that Africans would benefit from Christianity and other edifying, civilizing effects of Western culture, even as they proudly documented examples of Africans’ achievements in governance, commerce, the arts, and the military. Their lack of concern about these blazing incongruities may be traced to their exposure, along with white Christians, to religious dogma and instruction that centered the theme of God’s unconditional love yet supported white supremacist attitudes predicated upon a belief in the inferior and superior races of humanity. White abolitionist Christians such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96), for example, could argue for the end of slavery while in the same breath insisting that free African Americans were ultimately better off and perhaps more temperamentally suited to living apart from white people.

African American women writers who at once admired and patronized Africa and Africans thus did so in the context of an educational or religious training inflected by such ideas. They
also attempted to subvert them. By acknowledging some need for Africa’s improvement requiring the West’s intervention, some common ideological ground they shared with white British and American audiences and readers, such as evangelizing the continent and rooting out so-called superstitions, Black women gambled on winning a more favorable outcome in the long game of racial politics. Perhaps they would be heard and taken seriously if they enlisted white women in their campaigns against voter suppression, lynchings, the under-resourcing of Black schools and hospitals, inadequate housing and healthcare, and other signals of how U.S. society devalued them.

A through-line that both valorized and condescended to Africa and Africans continued among post-Reconstruction African American women writers. As the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) invited white suffragettes to “judge” Black women “by the depths” which they had overcome – i.e., an African past – to obtain education and other opportunities. At the same time, she redefined those “depths” by lauding the formidable intellect of the poet Phillis Wheatley (1753–84).11 “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773) had expressed Wheatley’s gratitude for her spiritual salvation while throwing shade on those so-called Christians who had kidnapped Africans like her into American bondage.12 Terrell emulated Wheatley’s double-edged strategy: she acknowledged white women’s assistance while advancing Black women as capable daughters of Africa who had earned their plaudits.

How could Black women writers and speakers maintain such longstanding contradictions about Africa while at the same time resisting stereotypes and re-imagining different meanings? Slavery and then imperialism, in the United States and Great Britain, generated forces that were sympathetic to Africans and the African Diaspora, not always for flattering reasons, or else outright opposed to them. Black women writers and speakers responded with fierceness to the opposition but resisted elements of paternalism and colonialism to varying degrees. Not only did the strategy of forging alliances with white institutions and individuals figure into this calculus and explain such contradictions; so, too, did the pressures of partnering to create social change while serving cultural expectations that prioritized their roles in the domestic sphere. In their writings during the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras and at the height of nineteenth-century American and British expansionism, Gertrude Bustill Mossell and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper offer examples of how such racial and gender politics informed Black women’s perspectives on Africa. Mossell’s commitment to Black women’s public service that centers maternity and marriage is evident in how she defines Africa as both powerful and in need of rescue. Harper breaks more fully from this quandary, recasting the continent and its peoples as symbols of liberation and autonomy.

Africa, maternity, and patriarchy

A literature review by T. McCants Stewart in the October 1885 New York Freeman praised a sister periodical, the A.M.E. Christian Recorder, for bringing “to notice” African American literary women “whose learning challenges attention.” They included “Cordelia Ray and Frazelia Campbell,” “Frances E[llen], W[atkins]. Harper, Betty Ash Lee,” and “Gertrude Mossell” (Stewart 1885, 2). A journalist and former teacher, Mossell epitomized the cohort of educated, outspoken, selfless African American women, just one generation removed from enslavement, who participated in the vanguard of turn-of-the-century Black leadership. She was a cultural influencer whom the Freeman had tapped to publish a biweekly column on domestic news, “Our Women’s Department,” which also reported business matters for respectable, engaged, middle-class Black women in the know.13 Mossell’s fellow teacher, Lucy Wilmot Smith (1861–90), lionized her
for setting the standard “that sex is no bar to any literary work, that by speaking for themselves women can give the truth about themselves and thereby inspire the confidence of the people.”\textsuperscript{14}

Mosseil’s collective biography \textit{The Work of the Afro-American Woman} (1894) was a subversive text because it championed Black women’s contributions as writers and artists in resistance to assumptions about them as uneducable, immodest, selfish, and hypersexual.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{The Work} centered the aesthetic decisions and critical qualities of a Black woman editor like Mosseil within a genre of Reconstruction era and post-Reconstruction race histories dominated by storied Black men. The works of these male authors included the novelist William Wells Brown’s \textit{The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements} (1863); the Rev. William J. Simmons’ \textit{Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising} (1887); and the anti-lynching activist Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford’s three editions of his \textit{Tragedy of the Negro in America} (1897, 1898, 1901).\textsuperscript{16} Monroe A. Majors’ \textit{Noted Negro Women} and \textit{A[nrew]. A[ndrew]. Scruggs’ Women of Distinction} honored influential women as well as men.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, Majors’ and Scruggs’ collective biographies may have motivated Mosseil to pen her book one year later and to keep in mind the gender politics of being a Black woman artist and leader in patriarchal communities. Anticipating Mosseil’s balancing act between conforming to roles of motherhood and stretching beyond them, Majors’ \textit{Noted Negro Women} admired Mosseil for finding “time to do her special work, and to surround her two interesting daughters with the watchful care of a mother’s love” (Majors 1893, 130). Scruggs’ \textit{Women of Distinction} similarly noted the “literary work” Mosseil juggled in spite of having “little time” to complete it because of her responsibilities to her daughters and husband (Scruggs 1893, 25).

As Joanne Braxton astutely concludes in her Introduction to \textit{The Work} for the groundbreaking Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, Mosseil exemplifies the perspective of a “prototypical black feminist” (Braxton 1988, xxxix). According to Braxton, Mosseil’s selections of representative Black women demonstrate “strict adherence to a code of race conscious womanhood and black Christian motherhood” and deference to “masculine authority,” while making space for a mutuality with Black men in marriage and public and political affairs (xxxix, xxviii). Such partnerships after the Reconstruction between many African American men and women ran counter to how many white women were subordinated to men in their households.

The paratext of \textit{The Work} bears out Braxton’s argument. Mosseil thanks both women and men who have helped with her book: such collective networks advocated as effectively for Black people as the singular endeavors she describes. Similar rhetoric is evident in her short letter to the editor for the January 5, 1893, \textit{A.M.E. Christian Recorder}, published in what Frances E. W. Harper dubbed “the women’s era.”\textsuperscript{18} Her letter both demurred to conventional ideas about Black women’s public and domestic roles and opened vistas for different conceptions about their leadership. In “Will the Negro Share the Glory That Awaits Africa?” Mosseil supported A.M.E. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner’s project to convert people on the African continent from their perceived idolatry to Christianity.\textsuperscript{19} His mission was the culmination of a decades-long campaign in which African American evangelists had traveled to African shores.

For example, during the Civil War, the fugitive slave William Craft (c. 1824–1900) had accepted a commission from British Quakers and abolitionists to travel to Dahomey, negotiate an end to the internal slave trade, and convert its citizens to Christianity.\textsuperscript{20} During the Reconstruction, the formerly enslaved Baptist minister Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford had left Canada West’s chilly climes to proselytize up and down England and promote his scheme for building schools to prepare African Canadian youth for missionary work saving African and Asian souls.\textsuperscript{21} In 1893, as the curtain opened on the women’s era, the formerly enslaved Mrs. Amanda Smith (1837–1915), her body “broken down in health,” nevertheless uplifted souls by
publishing her memoir of spreading the gospel in Liberia and Sierra Leone, both colonized by England and settled by freed slaves.22 Craft, Stanford, and Smith are representative examples of Black evangelists who shared an affinity for Africa and Africans based on similar histories of cultural and linguistic erasure, geographical displacement, the trauma of racism, and creative resilience and resistance. They had envisioned a partnership between Africans and African Americans to spur the economic growth, political autonomy, and artistic blossoming of both constituencies. Yet, their correspondence and letters back to England, Canada, and the United States also projected their biases in favor of the veracity and superiority of Christianity compared with what was frowned upon as ignorance and myth in African religions.

Africa, freedom, and will

This criticism of the continent as a morally diminished place, buttressed at its peril against the one, true religion of Christianity, permeated nineteenth-century Black women’s submissions to the *A.M.E. Christian Recorder* and other Afro-Protestant print productions. For instance, in a poem the *Recorder* published titled “America’s First Cargo of Slaves,” Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman memorialized the 1619 kidnapping of Africans to Jamestown during the transatlantic slave trade. She accused their enslavers of profiting from the uncompensated labor of these “lost souls” while preventing their exposure to “Christian light.”23 As another example of such discourse, in the Parsons, Kansas, *Blade*, the correspondent “Mrs. Pryor” commended the altruism and sacrifices of Black women who funded schools and orphanages and raised money for foreign missions “dispensing the gospel among the heathen.”24 Sarah Jane Early’s address, “The Organized Efforts of the Colored Women of the South to Improve Their Condition,” similarly stated how the efforts of A.M.E. church women helped uplift the impoverished, “benighted heathen” of West Africa.25 Their religious auxiliaries took as guidance the New Testament parable of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41–4, Luke 21:1-4), in which the charity of the wealthy is overshadowed by the generosity of the destitute, a widow who owns less but offers more. By contributing small sums that added up to large donations to overseas missions, African American women demonstrated the modesty expected of their gender even as they engaged in global philanthropy.

Mossell frames her letter supporting missions in Africa with images of maternity that affirm received notions of African American women’s proper social roles. Her “first sight of a native African,” she writes after her letter’s opening paragraph, is of “ten native African boys” introduced on-stage at an event on the historically Black campus of Lincoln University. “I loved those children from that day,” she enthuses. She reports that “[y]ear after year” she reconnected with them until each and every one had matriculated from Lincoln. After three paragraphs encouraging the magazine’s readers to rally in support of “uniting America and Africa” based on mutual Christian identity, Mossell returns to the children. She encourages individual A.M.E. churches to establish pen pal programs that connect their youth to “one little native boy or girl.” “To the women and children,” she underscores, “it would be but a widening of the loving influences they throw around their own home circle” (Mossell 1893,1).

This imagery of nurturance and compassion is countervailed by a masculinist rhetoric of discovery and domination. Her correspondence thus positions Black women’s public writing as acceptable public advocacy as long as it sanctions direction from men and privileges women’s domestic responsibilities. Yet, her missive appears against the cultural backdrop of late nineteenth-century African American women seizing national and international platforms for their voices and opinions to be heard beyond their homes and communities. In 1893 and 1894, Ida B. Wells would go global with her anti-lynching campaign by embarking on a two-year tour speaking and fundraising in England.26 A few years later, in 1896, the National Association
of Colored Women would form out of the merger of regional and local women’s groups. By 1893, the year of her letter’s publication, Mossell, too, would have been familiar to the Recorder’s audience not only as a correspondent to that publication but also as a regular columnist on women’s and race issues for such widely circulating Black urban newspapers as the New York Freeman and New York Age (1884–7, 1887–1960), Philadelphia Standard-Echo (c. 1890–c. 1896), and Indianapolis Freeman (1888–1926). The word “unity” is the most repeated in Mossell’s “Will the Negro Share the Glory That Awaits Africa?” Mossell at one point capitalizes its every letter. In the context of her larger body of work about opportunities for Black people, she endorses two points: the mutually satisfying collaborations between African Americans and Africans, and the mutual progress, rather than competition, posed to Black men by influential Black women like her. She directly requests that both women’s and men’s benevolent groups of the A.M.E. Church, “King’s Daughters and Son’s Circles,” share in the work of evangelizing Africans (Mossell 1893, 1). On January 5, 1893, when her letter appears, another year has dawned. The new century, and the efforts of African Americans to make it a rewarding and prosperous one, has engendered hope. By closing her submission with “the times that are in his hands,” an allusion to how God delivers the faithful from evil, Mossell invites African American women and men to join together in the race’s project of economic, educational, and religious transformation. Yet her vision of another strategic collaboration, one between Afro-Christians and Africans, stands in tension with her attitudes towards Africans who shrugged away the gospel and its messengers.

Published in or reprinted from her 1874 edition of Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, Harper’s “The Death of Zombi” and “The Dying Bondman” braid together the destinies of African Americans and Africans and assert their struggle against oppression at a moment when the promises of Emancipation were still unrealized (87–8, 180–1). “An “African chieftain” is the central figure of Harper’s “Dying Bondman.” He has been defeated in his fight to retain his freedom and has spent his remaining adult years enslaved. On his deathbed, he faces one final chance to be free. Rather than contend with the shame and disappointment of his ancestors, who would “shrink back” from him if he crossed into the afterworld resigned, victimized, and defeated, he successfully inverts the master–slave hierarchy, demanding and receiving his free papers. “Master! write it, write it quickly!” he commands, “Master! write that I am free!” (181). Similarly, “The Death of Zombi” features a South African leader who is hunted by enslavers and captured with his people after losing a bloody battle for liberation. Faced with the prospect of either “freedom in death or the life of a slave,” the “warlike old chief” elects to fall to his death along with other defiant fighters (87, 88).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “zombie” once connoted a chief or authority figure in Angola and the Congo. Men, women, and children were marched from there by enslavers to coastal West Africa for transport to servitude in the Caribbean and coastal American South. By 1872, a different kind of zombie had staggered and lurched into southern lore: a soulless, ghoulish human deprived of willpower and speech. Zombies have become post-9/11 twenty-first-century cultural fixations through media franchises such as The Walking Dead (2003–present), novels such as Colson Whitehead’s Zone One (2011), and movies such as Contagion (2011) and World War Z (2013). What registers the humanity of the Africans of Harper’s 1874 poems is not only their un-zombielike assertions of will but also their plangent writing or oration. Harper implies that Black women like her, through the productions of their pens and the chorus of their voices, share these imagined Africans’ intransigence, strivings to live freely, and insistence on being heard.

The frail yet determined hero of “The Dying Bondman” triumphantly “grasp[es]” his freedom papers before expiring. The story of “The Death of Zombi” similarly empowers its African
subject because it is narrated in first-person plural. It is narrated from the perspective of those Africans who together have survived the unspeakable, may or may not yet be free, but definitely have retained their prerogative to frame their own narratives of struggle and success rather than ceding them to white people who have decimated their kingdoms and cultures.

Conclusion: re-imagining Africa

Nineteenth-century African American women writers revisited and complicated meanings of Africa as part of a broader cultural project to affirm the value of their accomplishments and expand the possibilities of their lives. Whether they traveled to Africa as missionaries and teachers or encountered it indirectly through reading about its culture and history and meeting visitors to this country, they grasped its power as a canvas for expressing their family and community concerns, their exclusion from full citizenship in American society, and their aspirations for full enfranchisement and more expansive opportunities for their progeny. During the new century, they would helm publications of their own, such as the Colored American Magazine, edited originally by Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859–1930), and the literary pages of The Crisis, curated by Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882–1961). They would raise their voices in this new century to attain the vote, to pursue courses in higher education, and to press for civil rights. The mixed messages about Africa in their writings during the difficult, transitional nineteenth-century decades may not square with their activism but do not tarnish it. At moments, they even succeeded in fully breaking free from the constraints that influenced their writings about the continent.

Notes

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18 Zackodnik, “We Must Be Up and Doing,” 231. Zackodnik notes that Black women’s networks “had actually been underway for some time” on local and regional levels.


22 Amanda Smith, An Autobiography; The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of her Life Work of Faith, and her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary (Chicago: Meyer and Brother, Publishers, 1893), 8.


26 Zackodnik, “We Must Be Up and Doing,” 182.


29 “My times are in thy hand; deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them That persecute me.” Psa. 31: 15, King James Bible Online, last modified 2019, www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Psalms-Chapter-31/#15.


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