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Wilderness of Freedom: Slave Narratives, Captivity Narratives, and Genre Transformation in Keckley's Behind the Scenes

Hannah Gautsch

University of Kentucky, hgautsch@umw.edu

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Hannah Gautsch, Student

Dr. Michelle Sizemore, Major Professor

Dr. Michael Trask, Director of Graduate Studies

WILDERNESS OF FREEDOM: SLAVE NARRATIVES, CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES, AND
GENRE TRANSFORMATION IN KECKLEY'S *BEHIND THE SCENES*

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Hannah R. Gautsch

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Michelle Sizemore, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

WILDERNESS OF FREEDOM: SLAVE NARRATIVES, CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES, AND GENRE TRANSFORMATION IN KECKLEY'S *BEHIND THE SCENES*

As a modeste well-versed in the social expectations of the domestic world, Elizabeth Keckley crafted an autobiography that would appeal to this wide variety of audiences. Throughout the 1850s, women across the nation negotiated the terms of True Womanhood and identified activism as a space where women could engage with national concerns. At the same time, literary production in the US was increasing exponentially, creating room for literature to be used as a means of social change. Contemporary scholars have devoted much attention to the ways Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* combines elements of multiple genres to assure its long-term survival. To this conversation I wish to add the colonial captivity narrative, which offers a strong sense of narrative closure along with a unique perspective on the role of narrator. I argue that close readings of Keckley's text reveal how the generic landmarks of colonial captivity narratives have been used to structure *Behind the Scenes*. These details reveal the meticulous nature of Keckley's creative process, allowing her to portray the inner life of the Lincoln family from the outside while still prioritizing the true story at the center of the narrative—her own.

KEYWORDS: Keckley, Rowlandson, Wakefield, captivity narrative, True Womanhood, genre

Hannah R. Gautsch

5/6/2021

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By

Hannah R. Gautsch

Dr. Michelle Sizemore

Director of Thesis

Dr. Michael Trask

Director of Graduate Studies

5/6/2021

Date

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Introduction

When Elizabeth Keckley set out to compose *Behind the Scenes*, she recognized that the scope of her life could not be compressed into the genres available to her. Her literary context was dominated by slave narratives, sentimental novels, and other forms of popular fiction, none of which offered the space to present *each* part of her life with the value they deserved. Instead of flattening her story to fit into these molds, Keckley applied the skills of innovation and transformation that had made her a successful modiste to her literary project, weaving a narrative characterized by its unique combination of generic elements. This assured her text would be read by a variety of audiences from those interested in the Lincoln family, to women maneuvering a changing domestic space, to freedmen learning how to lead new lives after enslavement. To accomplish this goal, Keckley borrows elements from the captivity narrative genre in order to balance the segments of her life within a structure that asserts their value without compromising the power of her narrative voice. In combination with other genre elements, the captivity narrative structure provides coherence and legibility as it guides the text, providing a smooth narrative arc to a life that otherwise resists easy categorization.

Elizabeth Keckley's personal story was, as she describes, "full of romance" (3). Born a slave south of Petersburg, Virginia, Keckley purchased her own freedom in St. Louis, Missouri, and then went on to become a successful modiste in Washington, DC. Her hand-crafted dresses currently exhibited at the Smithsonian are evidence of her meticulous attention to detail. Her only published narrative, *Behind the Scenes*, published in 1868, is also hand-crafted with episodes from throughout her life representing herself as a self-made businesswoman. Yet, as she states in her introduction, the impetus to write *Behind the Scenes* was not only to share her own story, but also to defend the character of her most prominent client, former First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley shares details her relationship with Mary Lincoln from their first interactions, through the deaths of Willie and President Lincoln, and into the First Lady's widowhood and her "Old

Clothes Scandal.” This focus on Mary Lincoln would become a proponent of the backlash against the text. Critics ridiculed Keckley as a servant who had “forgotten her place” and the former First Lady as an embarrassment to the Lincoln legacy. Academic opinions largely followed this initial pushback and dismissed *Behind the Scenes* as an exposé with little inherent value for several decades after its publication. This pushed Keckley’s text out of public memory until *Behind the Scenes* was revived by literary scholars and incorporated into a longer lineage of African American women’s writing.

Contemporary scholars have been particularly interested in the ways *Behind the Scenes* incorporates elements of the slave narrative genre, sentimental genre, and others. These genres allow Keckley to highlight distinct elements of her story such as her relationship with Mary Lincoln, the potential of freedmen’s citizenship, and the value of her own personal freedom all in the same text. Yet with this range of generic elements, her text has been assigned labels like “schizoid” (Berthold 75) and “miscalculated” (Jepson 19) because its narrative arc is unusual. Slave narrative elements take up only three or four chapters, while Mary Lincoln only appears in the later half of the narrative, and other stories such as Keckley’s relationships with Mrs. Davis and the Garland family are folded between these sections. Though Keckley scholarship is steadily increasing, there is still little scholarly consensus on Keckley’s rationale for organizing her text the way she has. It is this lingering question that this thesis seeks to explore.

When Keckley is returned to her historical, critical, and literary contexts, the complicated elements of her text become logical and intentional. The decades preceding *Behind the Scenes* boasted a bustling literary marketplace characterized by innovation and transformation, and Black authors throughout the antebellum period engaged with these expanding literary opportunities, with literary production of all types increasing exponentially during the 1850s. These new texts often featured a combination of political and creative goals that interacted with each other in ways that challenged conventional genre categories. This same sense of transformation can be seen in the domestic sphere, as women across the nation negotiated the terms of republican

womanhood and identified activism as a space where women could engage with national concerns. As a modiste extremely well-versed in these domestic expectations, Keckley crafted a text that would appeal to this wide variety of audiences. Though *Behind the Scenes*' "sensational" content saw it pulled from the shelves early in its publication, it survived first as a piece of Lincoln scholarship and then as part of the slave narrative tradition. Keckley has currently been receiving more individual attention, and as a result scholars have now turned their attention to the many genres of *Behind the Scenes* rather than focusing on only one or another. To this conversation I wish to add the captivity narrative genre, which offers a strong sense of narrative closure along with a unique perspective on the role of narrator. I argue that close readings of Keckley's text reveals how the generic landmarks of captivity narratives have been used to guide the structure of *Behind the Scenes*. These details reveal the meticulous nature of Keckley's creative process, which allowed her to portray the inner life of the Lincoln family while still prioritizing the true story at the center stage of the narrative—her own.

In order to account for this level of detail built into *Behind the Scenes*, this thesis is divided into three chapters which will address the text's historical context, critical scholarship, and formal content. Together these three avenues map the routes Keckley took to assure her text would be preserved regardless of its immediate reception. The first chapter examines the literary marketplace of nineteenth-century America, the growth of African American literature in the Reconstruction period, and the intersections of literature with the changes in the domestic space leading up to the Civil War. In combination, these themes represent the social influences guiding the artistic choices Keckley made in her autobiography. The second chapter is oriented toward Keckley scholarship, following *Behind the Scenes* from its original publication to its revival within African American literary studies. To discuss its most recent scholarship, I focus on Keckley's use of genre, then discuss the value of bringing the captivity narrative genre into this conversation. The third chapter looks closely at the text of *Behind the Scenes* to explore the ways the captivity narrative genre influenced the structure of Keckley's text. I examine the elements

Keckley borrows from the captivity narrative to balance her account of her time with the Lincoln family alongside her work with freedmen in Washington, DC and her own journey through freedom. I then close the chapter and the thesis with a reflection on the care Keckley took to preserve her own narrative voice, and how this care might guide future research on *Behind the Scenes*.

Though freedom may have been more comparable to a wilderness than a staircase to heaven, Keckley saw that she had an opportunity to reassure her fellow freedmen that the journey through freedom would be just as worthwhile as its destination. As a whole, this thesis seeks to expand the scholarly conversation on *Behind the Scenes* by pushing against theoretical boundaries and emphasizing genre's inherent flexibility. When separated from its literary context, Keckley's narrative was dismissed by scholars as unbalanced and distracted. Thankfully this reception has begun to change, and Keckley has slowly but surely been returned to her proper place within literary scholarship. I wish to examine and enhance this change by challenging the idea that an author must always be the *object* of their text to retain narrative control. Through Keckley's example, I hope to add to the wealth of evidence showing that when no spaces were open to them, Black women authors created interstitial spaces to preserve themselves, their communities, and their voices. Whether those spaces were physical, social, or literary, they were shaped by these determined survivors who refused to allow history to write them out. This thesis is a brief attempt to map one corner of those networks of literary life Keckley used to endure her unpredictable circumstances, in the hopes of providing a foundation for further research.

Chapter I – Historical Context

When Elizabeth Keckley relocated to Washington, DC, she placed herself at a focal point of American life during the tumultuous 1850s and 60s. In these decades the city became a bastion for freedmen fleeing the South and a center for women's work as the war-boom brought women from across the US to fill federal positions in a time of unprecedented clerical need (Ziparo 7). This influx of new citizens created an unusual social climate full of potential difficulties but also new opportunities. Keckley was not the only Black author drawn to the city in these decades—several prominent Black activists eclipse in DC during this period, including Jacobs and Douglass (Yellin 158). While Jacobs worked as an educator and correspondent for charity interests and Douglass fought for the fair treatment of Black soldiers, Keckley worked to establish the Ladies' Contraband Relief Association to raise funds for the freedmen with a variety of outreach opportunities and fundraisers (162). As a result of the intermingling of groups like suffragists, abolitionists, and labor movements in Washington, DC, a variety of political, social, and economic forces influenced each other. Entering this space as middle-class, literate, artistic, and entrepreneurial freedwoman, Keckley found herself situated at the crossroads of several conflicting social categories.

Keckley had built her career studying the social codes of dress, speech, and relationships within the domestic space in order to design her own freedom, negotiating her skill as a dressmaker to establish connections with elite clientele. She learned to maneuver the “ironies of the system” first to accomplish her personal goal of becoming modiste to the First Lady, and then to write her autobiography (McKoy xiii, xxiii). Several scholars have pointed out Keckley's skill in the domestic space to Mary Lincoln's detriment, demonstrating the ways that Keckley's mixed representation of the First Lady worked to highlight Keckley's own portrayal of republican motherhood (see Elam 220, Morton 176-177, Criniti 176-7). However, it is also important to recognize the ways that Keckley defended Mary Lincoln's failure to live up to the absurd

standards of the domestic sphere. By pulling the domestic curtains back from just one woman, Keckley was revealing too much about white women's gender performativity to avoid public pushback (Soriso 44). Rather than acknowledge the false promises of republican motherhood, American audiences ridiculed both Keckley and Mary Lincoln. In spite of this poor reaction to *Behind the Scenes'* first publication, I do not agree with scholars who consider this dismissal an indication Keckley "erred" or "miscalculated" (Jepson 18-19, Francis 158-9). Assuming Keckley was caught entirely off-guard by the reception of her text is dismissive of her well-proven skills working with the elite white women of St. Louis and Washington, DC. Examining the narrative within its literary context indicates that Keckley knew the power literary representations have not only for those writing personal narratives, but also those who are written about. Her intricate text reveals a deep understanding of several independent types of literary production that have yet to be fully explored.

While Keckley's story ultimately remains her own, her choice to share literary space with Mary Lincoln raises questions about why Keckley chose to write her story the way that she did—questions which can only be answered by a thorough analysis of the historical context relevant to the narrative. Keckley's work with freedmen's charities and other Black activists in Washington, DC is evidence that she, like several other Black women authors of the period, held to a notion of "intra-independence" defined by Li as "understand[ing] freedom not only as a condition of individual liberty, as a claiming of a singular, independent self, but also as a means to care for others" (25). I argue that Keckley's focus on "others" included Mary Lincoln, which explains why Keckley chose to weave her own autobiography with a defense of Mary Lincoln's character. Articulating the ways that Keckley maintains her power as narrator even while giving the Lincoln family a prominent place in her own story demonstrates the depths of Keckley's awareness of the literary tools at her disposal. Using the changes within American print culture as its foundation, this chapter will begin building this argument by examining the literary market of nineteenth-century America, the growth of African American literature in the Reconstruction period, and the

intersections of literature and women's issues. In combination, these themes represent the deeper influences guiding the artistic choices Keckley made in her autobiography and begin the work of untangling *Behind the Scenes'* narrative threads.

Literacy and Free Black Communities in Antebellum America.

Keckley arrived on the literary scene at a critical point in the expansion of American print culture, where novels and other forms of literature were quickly becoming accessible to a wider audience. A number of institutional changes throughout the nineteenth century such as advancements in printing capabilities and shipping via the growing train industry contributed to the expansion of the American book trade (Winship 18). The declining price of books encouraged Americans to read widely, from city populations to soldiers on Civil War battlefields, as citizens on both sides of the conflict traded newspapers, novels, histories, and dime store books (Winship 27, McParland 287). With the growth of mass media that came as a result, abolitionists saw new opportunities to deepen the national conversation surrounding slavery. These new technologies allowed abolitionists to spread their messages more easily, while the wide reach of abolitionism in turn brought attention to these new technologies (Ryan 12). Frederick Douglass' first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, began a larger trend of slave narrative publications throughout the decade. Abolitionist fiction also turned its attention to experiences and effects of slavery, as evidenced by Stowe's bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, published in 1852, which President Lincoln himself referred to as "the book that made this great war" (Yellin 125, Newman 3). As public interest in abolitionism swelled, literature became a key medium where competing voices could join in on the national conversation on slavery through both what they wrote and what they read.

For the African Americans escaping slavery during these decades, literacy was often a reminder of white enslavement and dehumanization. Southern slaveholding states

institutionalized state-level “slave codes” to make literacy illegal for slaves throughout the first half of the nineteenth century (Densu 79). This lack of access to literature was then circularly viewed as proof of African Americans’ racial inferiority (Gates 19). As a result of this history, regardless of how or where literacy is present within Black texts, literacy itself is often seen as closely connected to agency and self-determinacy. Though this can be seen in archival material and court cases (see for example Hartman 10-14), the Black authors working during this period also demonstrate the mixed legacy of literacy within growing Black literary cultures. Douglass tracks his progress leaving slavery behind and becoming a man through the symbol of his growing literacy (LeRoy-Frazier 153). Jacobs, who published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861, recounts the ways her own literacy served as a form of direct resistance to outsmart, evade, and eventually escape her enslaver (Yellin 12-13, 57). Like these examples, Keckley’s text also shows the ways literacy became entangled with agency and self-determination in the lives of former slaves. Though Keckley does not include her personal story of learning to read in her autobiography, she kept careful track of her correspondence throughout her life (Keckley 16, 24, 115, 123). In this case, Keckley’s choice to turn to literature to defend Mary Lincoln shows that she understood the advantages of this literary medium to construct powerful positive characterizations and repair reputations.

The creative representation of their authors’ inner lives also contributed to these early Black texts’ political significance. Not only were these authors concerned with giving witness to the facts of slavery to support the abolitionist cause—they were also concerned with portraying themselves as intelligent, determined, and artistic human beings in their own right. Media representations of African Americans were often harmful in the first half of the nineteenth century, ranging from pro-slavery mockeries to abolitionists’ pitiful objects of white benevolence. As Ryan summarizes white abolitionists’ role in this problem, “the anti-slavery movement pursued its mission of moral suasion through print, producing and disseminating gift books, newspapers, and tracts, many of them replete with graphic descriptions and images of violence

against enslaved people calculated to engender outraged activism” (12). These representations of violence were damaging to the Black communities who read them, while also building a skewed perception of Black life in their white readership when these caricatures of slaves generated a “discursive self-presentation” (to use Mohanty’s terminology, 42) of white saviorism rather than genuinely confronting racial inequality. Not only was literacy itself an important step for Black self-development—the representations found within literature also needed to be critiqued and corrected.

Literacy was an important element of self-representation, citizenship, and political debate for free Black communities. Because the issue of slavery had divided the nation so deeply, abolitionists often referred to American revolutionaries’ literary rhetoric from the end of the eighteenth century as an example of the power of the written word to address national-level concerns. As McHenry explains:

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, reading, writing, and print were increasingly seen to be technologies of power. Colonists turned to written texts in the form of pamphlets and broadsides as a medium of public expression. ... To rhetoric the Founders assigned the most complex tasks of the new country: declaring political independence from England and creating a unified body out of the former British colonies. They believed that if rhetoric could organized individuals into a collective and move them to reshape their conditions, it could also lend durability to their experience. (42-3)

Literary rhetoric became a powerful expression of patriotism in the new nation, but free Black communities also had their own perspective on literature as a means of building up both the mind and the community at the same time (McHenry 23). Because these communities saw the similarities between the political context of the American Revolution and their contemporary abolitionist movement, they practiced the same rhetorical strategies to speak up against various legal pillars of slavery, such as the fugitive slave laws of the Compromise of 1850 and the *Dred Scott* decision limiting African American citizenship in 1857 (Yellin 107, 134). At the same time, free Black communities established literary societies and reading rooms to promote education and inspire self-confidence. This foundation allowed free African Americans to theorize, articulate,

and enact their own notions of citizenship even when their legal status as citizens was questioned (Spires 2-3, 7). These literary choices illuminate the ways that free African Americans created spaces of self-representation for themselves separate from the formal avenues of citizenship.

At the center of this concern for self-representation stood the Black press, which began to put down roots in the 1820s and flourished in the following decades (Wright 23). Black presses maintained by free Northern communities published a variety of literature ranging from traditional book-printing to newspaper serials (such as Douglass' *The North Star*, running from 1847-51), literary magazines (such as the *Anglo-African Magazine*, running briefly between 1859-60, see Wilson) and pamphlets (such as David Walker's *Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World*, published in 1829). These periodicals provided African Americans in both the North and South a space to discuss issues of importance and to engage with others in rhetorically diverse ways (Ryan 164). Black publications are critical to conversations about abolitionism, but associating the Black press *only* with abolitionism underestimates the larger value of this public medium (McHenry 88). The impact of these publications goes beyond abolitionism to develop literary culture and corresponding literary societies across the nation. To do justice to the depth of the literary activity these Black communities participated in, McHenry stresses that scholars should turn their attention to "recover more fully the history of African American cultural production, with all of its nuances and complexity ... [and] be open to replacing our notion of a singular black literary tradition by attending to the many, diverse elements that form the groundwork of any tradition" (6-7). In agreement with McHenry's position, Thomas adds that just as literature cannot be fully understood apart from its context, a period's historical context also cannot be properly analyzed without an intricate understanding of its literature (2). For this reason, in order to create a thorough picture of this period, the variety of Black publications must also be examined.

African American Literature During Reconstruction.

Free Black communities regularly reflected on their position within a “golden age of literature” and placed importance on both the political and creative benefits of reading widely (McHenry 116). Creativity in this sense represents the artistic integrity of Black authors and the value of Black self-expression separate from their abolitionist context. This concept of creativity goes along with Douglass’ own defense of Black literature’s political *and* creative value when he emphasized the slave narrative genre’s “veracity and political force” while also insisting on the “imaginative” value of Black writing outside of abolitionism (116). As McHenry explains, “in the midst of a dominant society for whom knowledge of the arts, sciences, and literature was highly valued, blacks increasingly believed that they needed to read widely and produce documents that were sophisticated in their presentation, as well as their content” (49). This dual emphasis on politics and creativity explains the increase of Black literary magazines during the tense 1850s, when a “literary explosion” saw new fiction and nonfiction published widely in spite of the intense legal battles being fought during these years (Spires 28). These readers saw the importance of meeting not only the moral ambitions of abolitionism, but also the social need for imagination, self-expression, and dignity needed to build a national identity for themselves that would outlast the conflict (McHenry 129). When Keckley composed her narrative, she wrote from and for Black readers who recognized the value of combining political goals with creative projects that would work in tandem to promote self-confidence, cooperation, and harmony.

The dual political and creative goals of African American literature provided a space to engage with the larger American public. Whether in the periods of conflict leading up to the Civil War or the Reconstruction years that would follow, conversations around benevolence, citizenship, and reconciliation touched on cultural tensions that resist easy generalizations (Thomas 35). Reconstruction authors wrote from a particular “mood of optimism” when reflecting on the past, where many intended their personal stories to contribute to the national healing Americans longed for after the close of the war (Andrews 24). While this emphasis on

reconciliation has been dismissed by some as “accommodationist” in contrast with the strong abolitionist rhetoric of antebellum authors, Andrews notes that once the war had ended, “it was no longer in the best interests of blacks, especially black Southerners, to continue to feed the sectionalism of the past” (28). Finding a balance between rebuking the Southern slaveholders responsible for the atrocities of slavery while not foreclosing the possibility of resolving their conflict was a difficult task for authors whose memories of enslavement were still fresh. At the same time, as American audiences expanded, American literature as a whole was still maturing as it struggled to throw off the dismissive label of European “imitation” by searching for its own unique voice (Reilly 269). Both as Americans and as African Americans, Black authors searched for new ways to answer Douglass’ call to write their own stories and paint their own pictures (Yellin 125). Black texts from this period play a critical role in emphasizing growth and change as opposed to disorder and decay, offering “narratives of an expanding universe, not a contracting one, in which citizenship is less about membership in a predefined group ... and more about creating structures that maximize human potential” (Spire 16). The literary strategies of doing so, however, vary between authors and individual texts, allowing for similarities to arise even outside of formal literary traditions.

When examining texts with an eye for these literary strategies, genre becomes a consistent factor of Black creativity. Both Douglass and Jacobs, considered archetypes of the slave narrative genre, also contain elements of other genres that point to the ways their work interacted with their literary contexts. Comparing Douglass’ first autobiography with his later autobiographical work charts how the slave narrative genre evolves through the end of the antebellum period and into Reconstruction (Andrews 30-31). Likewise, a significant portion of the scholarship surrounding Jacobs’ *Incidents* includes the incorporation of elements from the sentimental genre popular at the time (Gomaa 375). As recent Reconstruction research has shown, these archetypal authors are engaged in a literary marketplace full of authors who are not often able to be pinned into one genre or another. Other important authors such as William Wells

Brown, Harriet E. Wilson, Julia C. Collins, and Hannah Crafts have similar generic complexities, situating themselves between genres rather than adhering to one specific generic model. This same phenomenon is also seen in the “as-told-to” narratives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, whose questions of authorial intent and editor influence might also be framed as a question of genre (Yellin xv). While a significant portion of Black literary production during the decades is devoted to the slave narrative, knowledge of the literary marketplace beyond the slave narrative is a critical element of analyzing literary context.

Movement away from archetypal genres and into genre fusion has generated fascinating new insights in various areas of nineteenth century scholarship, including African American studies and women’s autobiography. As the numbers of stories in print rose during these early decades, genre categories such as “Romance” and “Adventure” helped to attract readers and keep track of published materials but were often complicated as quickly as they were created (Diffley 81-83). McHenry discusses generic gaps as a point of development for nineteenth century scholarship, as an area that needs more articulation in order to revive those voices which have fallen out of the larger picture of Reconstruction literature (6). When scholars read with an eye for genre *fusion* rather than texts that strictly follow genre archetypes, the mid-nineteenth century boasts decades of reinvention and revitalization. The example of Jacobs has already been briefly shown, whose earliest reviews were already noting its generic flexibility by referencing both sentimentalism and “popular uplift fiction” to describe its style (Yellin 148). Other authors outside the African American tradition were also engaged in this genre transformation as well, such as Sarah Wakefield (who will be returned to in the third chapter) who subverted the expectations of the captivity narrative genre to reveal the US government’s culpability for indigenous conflicts on the Western frontier (Derounian-Stodola xv). These texts may suggest a trend where Reconstruction’s social conflicts were best demonstrated in literature with the breaking of genre boundaries. But in order to pursue this question further, literary context must be paired with knowledge of genre. For this reason, careful reflection on the generic elements

represented in *Behind the Scenes* will generate new insights into both Keckley's goals for her text and her strategies of accomplishing those goals.

Genre, Domesticity, and Republican Womanhood.

Genres can be thought of as both tools of creative expression and mediums through which to debate larger political issues simultaneously. Some of these genres would be more familiar to Keckley and her fellow activists than others because of their popularity, target audiences, or both. Sentimentalism is a classic example, which provided middle-class white women with a space to articulate their desires, their thoughts about their role in their country, and the boundaries of their communities (Ryan 5, 16). As Fellner and Hamscha explain, the sentimental novel became a “refuge for female readers ... who could escape their dour realities by indulging in their heroine's adventures [while also allowing] female writers to renegotiate and subvert the nation's political and social order” (158). But these authors also note that this refuge was not necessarily unique to sentimental novels, but to literature itself. Sentimentalism's generic role was nothing new—in fact, American women had used various genres as communal spaces since the beginning of the new nation. One earlier example of this sort of generic space was the captivity narrative, which also allowed for white women to share their stories and to engage in the work of creating a national identity through their writing (Derounian-Stodola xi). The resemblances between these two vastly different genres demonstrate the ways that “popular” generic spaces were historically dependable for women to articulate their own perspectives, particularly during times of profound change. Further, McHenry suggests that literature served a similar role for free African American women as well, and the interactions Jacobs and Wilson had with the sentimental tradition provide evidence for this claim (57). With this in mind, genre appears to be an illuminating guide to map the literary world these women participated in.

As both McHenry and Stansell show, female literary audiences flourished in America as literacy rates continued to increase throughout the nineteenth century. For white women in

particular, this increase was strengthened by the ideal of republican motherhood, which encouraged women to maintain the home as their primary domestic space. Stansell credits the religious revivals of the 1820s and 30s with women's rising confidence in public roles when she discusses how the growth of print, abolitionism, and modern American feminism were tied up together (37). During the early decades of the nineteenth century, women were engaged in discussions around how to fit previous domestic values into newly-forming ideals of family and nation. To bridge the gap between old and new, "republican motherhood [was refashioned] into an explicitly Protestant and implicitly middle-class understanding. ... [The home] was a sphere of its own, a separate source of national values and morality, flourishing under the authority of women" (31). Abolitionist women applied these new understandings of the home to their roles in the nation, framing their benevolent work as "charity" to justify their outspokenness without leaving the boundaries of the home (Ryan 7). This new benevolent role validated their citizenship and inspired many great American women authors to build public platforms that would support their activist work, such as Lydia Maria Childs and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Within this changing structure elite white women promoted the idea of the doting mother whose responsibility is to her household and whose worth is determined by the work she does for her family, regardless of the obstacles that kept many women from fulfilling this role. Though this ideal was absurd when applied to slave women's lives, these differences were often ignored as white women held both enslaved and free African American women to their same standard of domesticity (Hopkins 12). When white society made it impossible for African American women to remain in the home, white abolitionist women responded with self-interested benevolence, representing African American women and girls as powerless victims in chronic need of white women's aid instead of acknowledging their own complicity in upholding their domestic system. As Wright discusses, these poor representations "reflect their concerns vis-à-vis free black children ... [representing them] as the object of white benevolence" (41). This is yet another example where abolitionist women create a "discursive self-presentation" of themselves as

powerful citizens by contrasting themselves with an infantilized image of African American women (Mohanty 7). Many white women, including abolitionists, upheld the standards of republican motherhood that excluded African American women from “respectable” domestic society.

Several Black women authors address white women’s self-interested benevolent sentimentalism explicitly during this period, revealing the failings of Southern and Northern white women alike. Jacobs, for instance, recounts her abuses at the hands of her Southern mistress, but also speaks against her Northern host’s behavior toward her as well (34, 223). This makes clear that Jacobs is pointing out both the atrocities of slaveholding Southern women *and* the hypocrisies of Northern white women who are satisfied feeling superior to African American women who do not meet their standards of domesticity (Green-Barteet 59). Likewise, Wilson is also unashamed to recount the negative experiences she has had with Northern white women, which some scholars credit to Wilson’s lack of popularity when compared with authors like Jacobs (Foreman xxvi-xxvii). In order to thrive in spite of these apathetic women, African American women were not only required to be literate in the sense of reading and writing—they were also required to be literate in the codes of white femininity they had to maneuver in order to live and work (Wright 51, Francis 160). Their strategies often determined their levels of success.

Keckley joins these authors in addressing white womanhood but does so in a unique way. Like her contemporaries Jacobs and Wilson, Keckley sought to address a national audience in such a way that shares her true story while remaining a sympathetic and dependable narrator (Yellin 56, Tweedy 203-5). Yet Keckley’s approach is unique as a result of her deep literary knowledge, her familiarity with the ideological significance of African American literature, and her awareness of the effects of genre combination. Though she reveals some choice secrets of the domestic sphere and provides insight into the less-than-perfect lives of her elite clientele, she makes clear from the first pages of her narrative that her aim is to defend Mary Lincoln from the assaults on her character (Keckley 1). To accomplish this goal, she borrows from a variety of

genres that each contribute their own insights into Keckley's creative process. Thus, while at first glance Keckley's mixed representation of Mary Lincoln may appear to fit into the above trend of Jacobs and Wilson, the range of Keckley's genre work sets *Behind the Scenes* apart.

By grounding *Behind the Scenes* in its historical, literary, and social context, it becomes clear that Keckley understood the importance of genre to her audience and the ways that the incorporation and subversion of these literary conventions would allow her to command her own story. As a result she designed her narrative to include several strong generic elements that would appeal to a variety of readers rather than to one key audience. Though some scholars have referenced *Behind the Scenes*' lack of immediate popularity as a sign of the text's "miscalculation," I argue instead that Keckley understood the power of both the author *and* the subject of her text, and chose to incorporate them both. By using the best of the resources available to her in terms of American print culture, of Black philosophies on literacy, and her own knowledge of the intersections of genre and the domestic sphere, Keckley built a carefully tailored text that would assure her story would survive to be read by several different audiences. The endurance of her text is a testament to her success, and the roadmap of its journey back into the public eye reveals the ways her ingenuity *did* ultimately accomplish her goal.

Chapter II – Critical History and Genre

Along with her historical context, bringing Keckley back into her generic context allows for a fuller comprehension of the purposes woven into *Behind the Scenes*. Demonstrating the value of an unusual genre such as the captivity narrative requires surveys of the historical context and previous scholarship on genre in the text, with careful attention paid to the theoretical approaches that provide room for these new developments. To meet *Behind the Scenes* where it stands as a complicated network of genres and intentions, this chapter seeks to combine multiple approaches to arrive at a fresh interrogation of the text. For this reason, an overview of the critical history and genre scholarship surrounding Keckley are necessary to contextualize the importance of the captivity narrative.

Theorization meets practice when multiple scholars across time and genre boundaries are placed side-by-side to gain a more nuanced perspective on *Behind the Scenes*. This approach allows the methodologies of Black women authors of the nineteenth century to inform contemporary scholarship, a connection emphasized by Gabrielle Foreman in her book *Activist Sentiments*. While examining the diverse modes of resistance found in Black women's writing, Foreman coins the term "simultaneous address" in order to discuss the sort of complexity or "doubleness" present in nineteenth-century narratives which "forward *multiple* imbricated agendas" (4, emphasis added). This concept is related to Bahktinian heteroglossia but is tailored to work alongside the "double consciousness" of Du Bois to acknowledge how African American women's multiple languages of resistance push the limits of these terms. This sort of "simultextuality" allows these narrators to discuss

multivalent meanings that, rather than being subtextually buried beneath a principally reformist message of affective and emotional connection, are ... available at the primary level of narrative interpretation. These uses of multiple social languages are not buried, some under the others, as coded discourse is often understood; they are not subtextual ... but simultextual. (6)

Foreman's insistence on "scrambling the assumptions about truth, transparency, and easy accessibility with which antebellum African American women's writing has been especially associated" (6) makes her text a useful tool for articulating how Keckley's multiple intentions can exist on the same narrative level, side-by-side, rather than prioritizing one intention above others. For this reason, this chapter will layer critics and periods to build a full picture of Keckley scholarship first through its critical history and then through an overview of scholarship on genre in Keckley's text. The chapter will then close with a discussion of the theoretical value of expanding conversations about genre toward the captivity narrative.

Behind the Scenes was inaugurated into literary scholarship when interest in the slave narrative began to rise. The value of the slave narrative within the American literary tradition was championed by academics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., William Andrews, James Olney, and Francis Smith Foster. Reprint revivals encouraged by the civil rights movements of the 60s and 70s resulted in the publication of new editions of texts by Black authors from throughout American history. Many of these initial reprinted texts were from male authors, creating a lack of contemporary African American women writing in the same periods. This gap was addressed in the 80s when the Schomburg Library began another wave of reprints highlighting 19th century Black women authors. These reprints made authors like Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth much more accessible, while also reviving texts from lesser-known authors such as Mary Prince and Mattie J. Jackson. Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* also received a reprint within this 30-volume set.

As a result of this new accessibility of early authors, scholarship on Black women's writing increased in the 80s and 90s, and this growing field stirred fresh interest in Keckley's text. Andrews and Foster were two of the first scholars to incorporate Keckley into their body of work, followed by authors including Sidonie Smith and Jennifer Fleischner. Fleischner's two books, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (1996) and *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* (2003). *Mastering Slavery's* chapter devoted to Keckley is a psychoanalytic examination of the relationship between Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln with special

attention paid to how materialism and mourning construct the two women as reversals of each other (64). *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, on the other hand, is a fusion of historical research and creative biography that appeals to both researchers and non-academic readers. While *Masting Slavery* may be the more academically rigorous discussion of *Behind the Scenes*, it is Fleischner's later text that is more likely to be found on bookstore shelves because of its appeal to non-academic readership. Thus, Fleischner's combination of scholarly and artistic approaches helped to nurture interest in Keckley's life within both academic and public audiences.

Fleischner's work contributed to the continuing rise of interest in Keckley into the turn of the twenty-first century. These scholars debate Keckley's position as either an empowered agent or a disempowered victim, with most ultimately taking the position that Keckley "recasts herself as an empowered agent, rather than solely as a victim of bondage" (Santamarina 143). Some well-cited examples are Lynn Domina's essay in *Women's Life-Writing* (1997), Michele Elam's chapter in *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature* (2003), Xiomara Santamarina's chapter on Keckley in *Belabored Professions* (2005), and Jill Jepson's chapter in *Women's Concerns* (2009). This new scholarship contributed to Keckley's shift from a marginal author, whose significance comes from her relationship to other texts, to a subject valuable enough to discuss on her own. Their debates opened the opportunity for more articles to focus specifically on Keckley, such as Carme Manuel (2011), Clarence W. Tweedy (2011), Lisa Shawn Hogan (2013), Sarah Blackwood (2014), and Janet Neary (2014). This more recent scholarship has built on conversations of Keckley's character to focus on how that character has influenced the text itself, examining the formal elements of *Behind the Scenes* and asking questions about "not only what the text means, but also how it means" (Berthold 75).

Each era of Keckley scholarship has contributed its own insights on the impact of context on the reception of her text. Interest in Keckley has been steadily increasing within the academic world and without, as films like Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), recent Smithsonian exhibitions ("Every Eye is Upon Me," 2020-1), and other creative and scholarly writings have worked to

return Keckley to her rightful place in American memory of Reconstruction. The first volume dedicated to Keckley scholarship was Sheila McKoy's two-volume collection *The Elizabeth Keckley Reader*, published in 2016 and 2017. These volumes filled the need for a unifying text by placing earlier criticism side-by-side with new essays by scholars such as Regis M. Fox, Nannette Morton, Aisha Francis, and Janaka Lewis. The authors that she includes in her two volumes reflect her interest in "reclaiming and resituating Keckley and her work as the true historian that she was" (xxvii). Together these scholars speak for *Behind the Scenes*' currency on issues of race, gender, and class during Reconstruction, while also highlighting the importance of genre concerns in Keckley scholarship. All authors McKoy's volumes touch on genre in some way, and almost half of the 20 critical essays included deal specifically with genre. Genre, in this case, is a reoccurring question asked from the first introductions in the Schomburg Library to contemporary publications.

The first genre explored by scholars after *Behind the Scenes*' 1980s reprint was the slave narrative tradition. Scholars such as Andrews and Foster have dedicated significant scholarly attention to Keckley's interaction with this tradition, situating Keckley alongside examples like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Yet both scholars also identify the qualities in her text that place her within the Reconstruction or postbellum tradition of slave narratives highlighting the "Southern past as a potential resource" (Andrews 30) and the ex-slave's capacity for "progressive movement... [and] strength of character" (Foster 45). These readings of *Behind the Scenes*, which focus on the first three chapters of her text, emphasize that Keckley's life is being presented as an example of the ideals freedmen can aspire to, an optimistic look forward to newly-minted Black citizenship using the originating mythos of the American Dream to appeal to her audience's optimism and hopes for the future. This is an established reading of the novel that most scholars build on with their own contributions when writing on Keckley.

However, placing Keckley too firmly within the slave narrative genre threatens to limit the scope of her text, which inevitably moves *out* of Keckley's earlier enslaved years and into her

later life as a modiste. Readings that view Keckley's chapters on the Lincolns as insignificant or "accommodationist" (Andrews 28) misrepresent the hybridity of Keckley's prose, as argued by scholars like Katherine Adams and Carme Manuel. Just as McHenry stresses the fact that focusing *only* on the slave narrative misrepresents the complexity of literacy for the Black press, using *only* the slave narrative genre to understand Keckley's text is inadequate on its own.

Andrews references this danger of over-stressing the influence of the slave narrative tradition when he compares Keckley's and Frederick Douglass' autobiographies, writing that

[Both] identified themselves as revisionists intent on renewing the slave narrative as a genre that could still be relevant to the new post-slavery era ... [Revisionism in] postbellum slave narratives may thus instance a principle in Afro-American literary history that we have not fully reckoned with, namely, that no literary tradition is sacrosanct, that any myth, trope, or theme from the past may undergo revisionary renewal in response to the changing demands of the present. ("Reunion," 31).

Andrews argues that restricting the slave narrative tradition to an idyllic standard to be reached, rather than a living tradition subject to shifts and revisions, disconnects it from the real experiences that made the slave narrative genre so powerful. Reaching a well-rounded analysis of nineteenth-century texts requires both an assessment of their historical context and a careful appraisal of how scholars discuss the text.

While the first three chapters of *Behind the Scenes* adhere to the tropes of slave narratives, the latter half of her text follows a style much closer to that of sentimental fiction, another popular genre at the time. Using sentimentalism to stylize the domestic scenes of the Lincoln household allowed Keckley to create a niche for herself in the expanding market for texts on President Lincoln published in the years following his death. Sentimentalism also gave Keckley an opportunity to move past the inconsistencies of Lincoln's mythological status for the free Black community with his conservative, pro-colonial policies, particularly those present during his early presidency (Manuel 10-11). Her use of sentimental tropes cultivates an image of herself as an entrepreneurial woman showcasing the characteristics of republican motherhood—sometimes even directly in contrast to Mrs. Lincoln's coarse demeanor. Regis M. Fox elaborates

on the critical double-sidedness of Keckley's "sunny" relationship with the First Lady and works to emphasize how sentimentality is "embedded with political meaning and experience, [wherein] Keckley's sunbeams and blossoms, in fact, subtly conjure the saccharinity, posture, and pretense of liberal racial sentimentality" (133). In this way Keckley joins other female authors of slave narratives, particularly Harriet Jacobs and Harriet E. Wilson, in using sentimentalism as one simultextual level of her complicated text—and as yet another generic element she uses to weave her narrative.

Keckley's sentimental domestic scenes are organized in a way that echoes the rags-to-riches tradition that was also popular at the time. In this case, the "Alger myth" is fused with the image of dressmaking to illustrate Keckley's process of self-making (Criniti 168). When reading with an eye to these genre structures, the text's first half is focused on Keckley transforming herself into a self-made woman, while the second is focused on her skill of transforming other women, notably Mrs. Lincoln, into their own versions of republican motherhood. Criniti expands on this by posing Keckley as a type of Cinderella, "the good, humble, honest, and overall inwardly beautiful person whose goodness and diligence earn her the opportunity to transcend her life's lot" (168). He goes on to stress the narrative unity that is promoted by an exploration of this genre: instead of a "schizoid" slave narrative or sentimental novel (Berthold 75), *Behind the Scenes* becomes two independent halves of one complementary whole when read with an eye for the rags-to-riches genre (Criniti 171). In this way Criniti's essay shows how genre can soothe the perceived disjointedness that occurs when Keckley's complicated text is fitted too strictly into one tradition or another.

As proven by the backlash against Keckley's text in the 1860s, discussions of genre are not only aesthetic—genre is also an integral part of a text's context because of the ways reception can be impacted by generic categorization. After her publisher categorized *Behind the Scenes* as a "tell-all," Keckley's contemporary reviewers used this sensational genre as a means of dismissing the intentions and value of the text. Contemporary scholars writing on genre typically

reference these early accusations of sensationalism only in order to dismiss them. However, avoiding the exposé entirely means also losing Keckley's subversion of this sensationalist genre by denying accusations of slander while simultaneously preserving certain tropes of Abraham Lincoln's "martyrdom" that she knew would appeal to audiences eager for writing on the former president (Manuel 11). Though Keckley did not intend her narrative to be read as an exposé, there is still value in identifying the elements of that genre present in *Behind the Scenes* in order to track Keckley's own awareness of what genre constraints could contribute to her work. *Behind the Scenes*' fight against its sensational categorization is an important part of its history and should serve as a warning to stay aware of the ways the language of genre threatens to devalue the text even in contemporary scholarship.

Maintaining the idea that Keckley's narrative structure was composed intentionally in spite of its eccentricities is important to recognizing its inherent worth. Across its lifetime, several scholars such as James Olney, Jill Jenson, Xiomara Santamarina, and Rafia Zafar have criticized its structure, and in doing so have threatened to undermine the value of the text as a result. For example, in his introduction to the 1988 Schomburg Library edition of *Behind the Scenes*, Olney calls the text a "memoir" rather than an autobiography, arguing that Keckley is not the sole subject of her text and therefore *Behind the Scenes* should not be categorized as autobiography (xxxiii). This is a harmful reading because it erases Keckley's narrative power over her own story and what that meant to her. Lynn Domina responded to this argument by returning Keckley to the center of her autobiography, arguing instead that "she writes her narrative not simply because she has observed America and can tell about it, but because she demonstrates the character of the nation in the character of herself" (72). In any discussion of *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley should remain at the center of her own work, even while her narrative attention may be placed on different subjects (Criniti 184). Keckley's details about the people and spaces around her should not negate her position as author of her own work—instead, it is evidence of her status as designer of her text and authority within her life.

Reflecting Keckley's attention to detail, *Behind the Scenes* uses spaces and people she interacts with as complement to her personal story while giving appropriate space to both. This returns to the concept of "intra-independence" explored by Stephanie Li in her book *Something Akin to Freedom* (2010), where she pays special attention to African American women's non-traditional forms of resistance to slavery that often did not focus on masculine goals of escape alone (24). Instead, African American women were also interested in forms of freedom grounded in relationships (24). This intra-independence is seen in Keckley's narrative where she constructs relational networks with both Black activists and her white clientele, achieving her freedom with the help of her white patrons in St. Louis and then establishing herself alongside both her fellow Black women activists and a dedicated circle of elite white women in Washington, DC. Rather than allowing these relationships with her white clientele to *contest* her independence, Keckley gains an unusual amount mobility and economic stability during the tumultuous Reconstruction era that gives her the opportunity to aid other former slaves in their own transition into citizenship. This also informs Keckley's choice of genre by inspiring her think deeply about what audiences she is writing for, how to appeal to multiple audiences at once, and how to assure her autobiography would be a guiding text for the people she spent her life caring for. To speak to each of these concerns at once, Keckley ultimately turned to genre.

It is out of this question of audience and the combination of genres that I argue captivity narratives bring new clarity to the discussion. Specifically, reading *Behind the Scenes* with an eye toward the conventions of captivity narratives allows for a conceptualization of author as *observer* that preserves Keckley's agency while also justifying her choice of objects and structures in her text. In order to show how the text interacts with the captivity narrative tradition, this chapter will close with a brief discussion of how current genre scholarship might be developed in new directions via analysis of the connections between slavery, domesticity, and the imbalanced relationships that characterize the experience of captivity.

Examining *Behind the Scenes* for its similarities to captivity narratives is an area not yet trespassed in Keckley scholarship. In some texts the captivity narrative genre is tantalizingly skated over, such as when Foster places Keckley into a longer tradition of Black autobiography that includes the captivity narratives of Briton Hammon and John Marrant (36) but chooses not to expand on that connection. This genre gives Keckley useful tools to structure her texts with identifiable landmarks of removal and return, while also incorporating herself into a larger American mythos of citizenship. This argument supplements previous discussions of generic convention in *Behind the Scenes* to demonstrate that Keckley's intersectional social position demands drawing from intersectional sources of Black, female, and working-class traditions to accomplish her literary goals.

Though this connection is not explicitly drawn out by previous scholars, discussions of agency and subjectivity have been a cornerstone of criticism within African American literary studies for the last few decades. Hortense Spiller's influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987) lays the necessary groundwork to analyze captivity narratives and slave narratives within the same conceptual and historical space. Spiller's explicit connection between captivity and slavery points to slavery as the "originating metaphor of captivity and mutilation" and the "dominant symbolic activity" of American culture (68, 70). The terms she uses here, such as the "woman on the boundary" (74), are useful to bridge the theoretical gaps between captivity narratives and slave narratives. Other established authors are also helpful within this generic gap, such as Valerie Smith whose 1987 text *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* highlights examining the way a text "engages with, challenges, and transforms narrative conventions and the politics they enshrine" in order to "arrive at a fuller understanding of its rhetorical achievement and the complexity of its ideology" (7). These ideas are best combined with contemporary scholars such as Li, Foreman, and Kyla Schuller who build off of their foundation.

The captivity narrative genre was useful for Keckley's purposes because *Behind the Scenes* is poised in a position of flux and change, where eighteenth- and nineteenth-century understandings of citizenship and race were in still in competition with each other, creating literature that intersected with these cultural changes in unpredictable ways. Schuller's text *The Biopolitics of Feeling* explores this interdependence of concepts of race and literacy, particularly how the sentimental genre concealed deep cultural understandings of the connection between an individual's race and their moral character. Schuller coins the term "sensorial discipline" to articulate how "civilized" races, and especially white women, were required to "learn to master their sensory impulses and thus direct the development of themselves and their descendants," giving rise to the ideal of the bourgeois woman "who could mute the very presence of her body" (18). In light of Schuller's discussions, the sentimental tropes that Keckley uses to contrast herself with Mrs. Lincoln reveal their shared struggle to meet the demands of genteel womanhood. Yet, when placed alongside the slave narrative, Keckley also states firmly that these concepts of gentility were interwoven with race, and that the same lack of "sensorial discipline" that made Mary Lincoln a social pariah was being used to exclude African American women from elite white women's spaces. This close-knit relationship between domesticity and race was what made *Behind the Scenes* such a dangerous text, because it undermined the naturalization of African American women's exclusion from domestic spaces. While this connection between domesticity and race is made in more traditional slave narratives such as Jacobs' *Incidents*, Keckley's text has not received the same level of analysis as a result of its lingering genre questions. To bridge this gap, I hope to make new connections between popular domestic fiction and captivity narratives explicitly exploring the meanings of citizenship, the caveats of race, and women's responsibilities to their nation.

Keckley's work mirrored the complex point in history she inhabited. Keckley recognized the constraints of reducing her story to *only* the slave narrative, the sentimental novel, or any other literary tradition, and so she purposefully created a fusion of several literary traditions to

create something that would be her own. To accommodate these various elements, I argue that the overarching structure of the captivity narrative allowed Keckley to orient her story in a framework of removal and return. This narrative arc places the episodes of her life in context with each other while still granting psychological depth to her relationship with Mary Lincoln, her white clientele, the Garlands, and the Black activists she works with throughout her life. Thus, the true value of the captivity narrative's contributions become clear when the formal elements of the text are reflected on in detail, which will be the focus of the third chapter.

Chapter III – The Wilderness of Freedom

The symbol of the wilderness has been a familiar trope of American literature since the seventeenth century. This image often depicts spaces that are “uncultivated,” “ungoverned,” “alien,” and “uninhabited, or inhabited only by ‘barbarians,’ ” bringing with it an overhanging threat of danger and the unknown (Brooks 253). In *Behind the Scenes*, Keckley begins her narrative by referring to her life as a “wilderness of events” from which she must pick and choose in order to form a coherent narrative (7). But the wilderness also appears several more times throughout the book as Keckley describes the troubles freedmen must weather as they transition out of slavery: “we who are crushed to earth with heavy chains, who travel a weary, rugged, thorny road, groping through midnight darkness on earth, earn our right to enjoy the sunshine in the great hereafter” (10). Together the wilderness and the thorny road create a unique metaphor Keckley has chosen to explore in her narrative—the idea of freedom not as a destination, but as a journey not unlike the dangerous frontier explorations Americans had been undertaking for centuries. For Keckley, this journey into freedom brought settings, characters, and geographic mobility that exploded the traditional plot structures of the sentimental novel, slave narrative, and exposé. Scholarly work has been done to show the ways that Keckley carefully balances the expectations of each of these genres within her text, yet the overall structure of the text remains difficult to explain, described by various authors as “lopsided” (Elam), “schizoid” (Berthold), and “unbalanced” (Domina). However, when placing *Behind the Scenes* in context with Keckley’s carefully built networks of activism and expansive knowledge of domestic style, this explanation does not match.

In this chapter, I consider whether Keckley reached back to older, established genres such as the colonial captivity narrative to structure the episodes of her autobiography. Reliance on the colonial captivity narrative’s traditional arc of removal, wandering, and return would grant a coherence to her text that is still lacking according to other generic structures. While previous

scholars such as Criniti and Hogan have been explicit when comparing the rags-to-riches and exposé genres to *Behind the Scenes*, this approach is impossible for colonial captivity narratives, as there is no literal capture within the text. Instead, discussing the influence of the captivity narrative on Keckley's text demands a more fluid approach to generic influence. While genres can be defined from within, identifying genres from without reveals a lack of established theoretical language with which to discuss the sort of creative cross-contamination that exists between genre categories (Frow 13, 65). In other words, while colonial captivity narratives can be distinguished by their use of generic cues, the definitions of the genre begin to blur where fewer of those cues are present, with no firm boundary marking the distinction between colonial captivity narratives and other related genres such as the spiritual autobiography or the conversion narrative. For this reason I focus on three specific elements of Keckley's text that benefit most from contrast with the colonial captivity narrative: the overall structure of the text, the psychological depth of the relationship between Keckley and Mary Lincoln, and Keckley's self-positioning as both subject and observer.

At the time Keckley is writing, the idea of genre was still maturing. The authors who would go on to serve as archetypal examples of the slave narrative (including Douglass and Jacobs) were still actively working and publishing when Keckley composed her text. Advancements in print technology meant that the novel's popularity was still increasing, but as such the conceptions of genre were often fluid. Keckley's knowledge of the tropes of the sentimental novel show that not only was she extremely familiar with Lincoln narratives, she was also well-versed in sentimental novels and other domestic literature of her time (Elam 226). Keckley's familiarity with these genres makes sense in the context of her status as both a free African American woman in the North, whose social standing often depended on literacy and membership in literary clubs, and Keckley's well-maintained relationships with elite white women of DC, who were also engaging with domestic fiction themselves (McHenry 49). The sentimental tradition might have brought Keckley into contact with captivity narratives, as their

shared lineage in spiritual autobiographies often followed similar generic constraints (Derounian-Stodola xiii). Whether or not Keckley may have found herself reading a colonial captivity narrative herself, these narratives were a popular form of literature that had been published since before the American Revolution and were still being published during the Reconstruction period.

The phrase “captivity narrative” is an umbrella term that encompasses any story with a captor and captive, usually coming from two unfamiliar groups (Derounian-Stodola xi, Pierce 84). Captivity narratives have a strong plot element that follows a pattern of removal, wandering, and return, which allows texts to follow a familiar structure while making use of historical, gothic, sentimental, and epistolary techniques to bring individual stories to life (Derounian-Stodola xiv). Generic landmarks established across a narrative function as metacommunications to the audience of the text, preserving a sense of structure even in the face of dramatic cultural differences (Frow 115). Though individual steps within the structure are flexible, the readers of captivity narratives used these textual cues to follow the text’s underlying arc and gained satisfaction through watching its characteristic rise and fall (115). Sub-genres within the larger captivity narrative umbrella can be differentiated from each other via the particular cues used, as a “constellation of recognizable forms” rather than a “single interpretive framework” (14, 28). Foster discusses how early colonists adapted the form of autobiography to fit their experiences into this tradition, giving rise to both the more specific genres of colonial captivity and slave narratives (35). Because of their common lineage within the captivity narrative umbrella, these two genres are productive to compare.

The colonial captivity narrative, also referred to as the Indian captivity narrative or the American captivity narrative, is a tradition that stretches back to the very first interactions between white settlers and indigenous communities on the North American continent. In fact, some scholars have referred to the colonial captivity narrative “the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences” (Slotkin 95). The literature these interactions inspired caught the attention of English-language readers all over the world and had a significant

part to play in attracting new colonists to work and live in the colonies (Derounian-Stodola xviii). As a genre that predates the popularization of novels in the US, the colonial captivity narratives genre was very flexible and adapted easily to a variety of mediums including pamphlets, broadsides, histories, and poetry before their incorporation into novels (xiii). Additionally, these narratives were often written by white women who used the genre to recount their personal stories of capture by indigenous groups (xi). As novels became more popular in the US during the nineteenth century, fictional accounts began to replace nonfictional ones, with examples by authors such as Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Maria Sedgwick (Mielke 15-17). Derounian-Stodola notes that while interest in colonial captivity narratives peaked during the seventeenth century and then declined in the eighteenth, the market increased again in the nineteenth century in the wake of new Western expansionism (xviii).

As “the single narrative form indigenous to the New World,” the colonial captivity narrative was a critical element of the formation of white settlers’ emerging American identity (Kolodny 6, Pierce 84). For women writers this element was even more critical. As a result of its strong elements of character and conflict, colonial captivity narratives were a genre that allowed white women to naturalize themselves as citizens in their new settler state, whether they were writing in the seventeenth or nineteenth centuries. The genre gave these women an unusual power to “set the record straight” by publicizing their testimony as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Derounian-Stodola xviii). This social benefit, paired with interest about indigenous culture at home and abroad, made captivity narratives a powerful medium through which to naturalize white settler domination of colonized land (xiv). This combination contributed to the genre’s lasting vitality. To discuss Keckley’s interactions with this genre I will use two examples of colonial captivity narratives, the first from the seventeenth century and the second from the nineteenth, in order to show the common structure of these narratives and the shifts in the genre across these periods.ⁱ

The archetypal example of the American colonial captivity narrative is *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, published in 1682. The text was a best-seller when it was first published and was on its way to becoming a classic by the nineteenth century (Derounian-Stodola 3). Rowlandson's narrative incorporates elements of the spiritual autobiography to describe her capture during Metacom's War (or King Phillips' War), referred to as "the deadliest war in American history" (Drake 6).ⁱⁱ Rowlandson describes the attack on her town, her capture with three of her children, her journey through the wilderness with her mistress Weetamoo, her eventual ransom, and her return home. Though not the first example of the colonial captivity narrative in North America, Rowlandson's *A True History* was singled out as an archetypal example of its genre by scholars VanDerBeets and Slotkin (both, coincidentally, in 1973). The narrative has been examined in contemporary scholarship as an early example of American women's literature by scholars who have focused on the ways that "Rowlandson legitimates herself as a valid subject of her text [through the act of writing] and passes on this sense of authority to her readers on both sides of the Atlantic" (Derounian-Stodola xxii). As scholarship on captivity narratives has increased in recent decades, Rowlandson scholarship has also continued to increase, incorporating a variety of new approaches including psychoanalytic readings ("Reading the Posthuman Backward"), the economy of exchange (Goodman), and analyses of space (Bennett).

Questions of race is an expanding area of scholarship for both Rowlandson's narrative in particular and captivity scholarship in general. Many colonial captivity narratives were written by white settler women describing indigenous practices with strong motivations to portray them in a negative light as opposed to settler citizens and soldiers. Scholars have begun to undertake re-readings of these narratives in order to better understand the role social construction played in these narrators' observations, especially within the relationships between the narrators and their captors (Derounian-Stodola xx). For instance, contemporary scholarship has been interested in re-reading Rowlandson's narrative specifically for her Abenaki captor Weetamoo's presence.

Rowlandson's relationship to her captor Weetamoo is a unique element of her narrative because of the ways Rowlandson uses Weetamoo as a way of proving via contrast her own adherence to Puritan ideals of Christian womanhood (xxi). Lisa Brooks is an example of a scholar who has studied this relationship within *A True History*, dedicating a chapter to her recent work *Our Beloved Kin* to incorporate Rowlandson's narrative into a wider investigation of Metacom's War (253). In both these scholars' discussions, Rowlandson appears in regards to colonial captivity narratives and as one of the earliest examples of American women's autobiography as a whole. Elements of racial representation and indigeneity offer a point where colonial captivity narratives and slave narratives might be productively compared, even when the texts at hand come from different time periods.

Because of the colonial captivity narrative and slave narrative's common American context, reflecting on these genres' relationship to each other promises new insights for both. These two genres are each concerned with "rewriting painful memories into sites of self-empowerment" (Tweedy 214), yet the colonial captivity narrative's association with the early American period often eludes possible interaction with other later genres. Jacqueline Smith bridges these traditions with the term "confinement narratives," which she uses "to describe narratives in which women have lost freedom, whether it has been lost due to forceful or subtle coercion" (4). As she goes on to elaborate:

The literary genres of the Early American captivity narrative and the American slave narrative exhibit distinct characteristics based on the narrators' relationship to their captors and the cultural forces that shape their memoirs. ... [Yet] neither genre accurately encapsulates the experience of female entrapment. ... Due to these complexities, I affirm that a new term, "confinement," needs to be used to accurately conceptualize the narrative describing the plight of the trapped woman. (4)

The use of this term "confinement" emphasizes the generic similarities between colonial captivity and slave narratives, thus drawing attention to the experiences of social and psychological entrapment that Keckley and Rowlandson shared even while their physical and historical experiences were unique to their historical positions. I argue that the common threads of each

woman's narrative display a lineage of American women's writing on captivity that is both deeply symbolic and intertextual. When arbitrarily separated from each other, these genres lose an element of the hybridity present during their conception and original publication. In order to fully appraise Keckley's work, she must be read in conjunction with the genres that preceded hers, as these texts served as the literary foundation on which she stood in order to compose her text.

Colonial captivity narratives fill current gaps in Keckley scholarship by connecting the unusual structure of *Behind the Scenes* with the messages present within the body of the text. Previous scholars have discussed the ways that Keckley uses the various parts of her narrative as "layers" which fuse together to form a fully realized subject that is "a part of, not removed from, these histories" (Lewis 191, Tweedy 217, Morton 174). I argue that affirming the coherency of these elements of her life is not complete without an analysis of the structure that makes this coherency possible. Where slave narratives, sentimental novels, spiritual autobiographies, and other narratives typically highlight the author as the main actor of the text, colonial captivity narratives follow a tradition where the narrator has little to no agency, yet retains their narrative power through the powers of active observation and retelling. Using the familiar structure of colonial captivity, Keckley offers a new perspective that demonstrates the power of freedmen's voices even when they might see themselves as merely observers of the national scene.

Narrative Closure.

While scholars have been discussing the formal elements of Keckley's text since her reintroduction into literary scholarship, these readings still lack a unified interpretation of its structure. Genre elements each illuminate their own aspect of *Behind the Scenes*, but questions of structure are often left open-ended. Foster, for example, offers her own outline for the text according to her reading of Keckley's text as an autobiography:

Keckley's autobiography ... establishes its narrator as an individual of insight and integrity, demonstrates the development of a superior character by the endurance of oppression and vilification, and ultimately vindicates her suffering by the recognition of the rightness of her actions ... [She] reveals her current actions as merely another of a series of challenging situations in which she is required to play the facilitating role. ... [echoing] the Puritan idea of moral superiority achieved through adversity, a morality, in fact, that some whites had yet to achieve. (47, 56)

Foster's detail on the structure of the text reveals her emphasis on reading *Behind the Scenes* as a coherent narrative (56). However, her focus on Keckley's character alone obscures the Lincoln family's presence in the text—Foster acknowledges that there are times the Lincolns dominate the narrative, but chooses not to focus on those sections, pushing them to the periphery of her reading instead of fully integrating them (41). Scholars writing after the turn of the century have built on Foster's foundation and taken a variety of approaches to explain the unusual shape of *Behind the Scenes*. Berthold, as one example, explicitly speaks against “schizoid” readings of the text when he points out that “part of the work of recuperating a text such as *Behind the Scenes* involves determining not only what the text means, but also how it means” (75). Yet Berthold still prioritizes the “expressly indeterminate” element of Keckley's text rather than attempting to measure out her underlying structure (74). Both Foster and Berthold have offered explanations of the text's structure that have not left sufficient flexibility for Keckley's subversions of the autobiography and the slave narrative traditions (Neary 91). In other words, they efficiently explain Keckley's presence within these genres, but cannot account for Keckley's departures from these genres. For this reason, the scholarly gap between Keckley's careful intentionality and her unconventional structure remains.

Colonial captivity narratives' flexible arc of removal, wandering, and return allows Keckley to frame her text with generic landmarks while maintaining the integrity of each individual episode of her story. These sections are visible in Rowlandson's archetypal text but also present in a broader sweep of captivity narratives as well, including Wakefield, Bailey, Jemison, and others. The first section, “removal,” comprises the first three chapters of her

autobiography that align most closely with the postbellum slave narrative. The second section, “wandering,” takes up the bulk of the narrative, between Chapter IV and Chapter X, as Keckley explores her freedom and builds her relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln. The third section, “return,” includes the final three chapters of the autobiography with three separate “returns” which provide narrative closure for each of the three major threads of her plot. Alongside this bird’s eye structure, there are also generic cues that hint toward Keckley’s use of the captivity narrative structure within each of these sections. Overall, though the arc of Keckley’s story breaks other generic formulas, when *Behind the Scenes* is analyzed according to the traditional plot structure of the colonial captivity narrative the text’s unusual shape becomes cohesive and logical.

The first three chapters of Keckley’s text make up the “removal” section of the archetypal colonial captivity narrative structure. These chapters adhere to the slave narrative form discussed by Andrews and Foster, condensing that traditional arc in order to set the stage for the autobiography as a whole. Using the slave narrative form in this way, Keckley reverses the standard opening of colonial captivity narratives—instead of moving from freedom to captivity, Keckley moves from captivity to freedom. Freedom then becomes the new space that Keckley must navigate in place of the traditional wilderness. Keckley has an unusual amount of mobility for African American women of her era, which she weaves into her narrative to give a sense of physical movement alongside her psychological growth. Though this movement follows the antebellum movement from South to North (Foster 42), Keckley also expands this trajectory, moving back from the North into the South, and between East and West as well. This sense of mobility is a unique new experience for Reconstruction authors, who wrote at the cross-section of economic expansion via railroad and steamboat systems, and for Black authors who are also enjoying new modes of mobility post-slavery (Lewis 184). Physical mobility in this case is also intertwined with social mobility, and physical space with social space (Morton 163, 167). As Morton details, the spaces that Keckley moves through are critical components of the domestic

ideals that she deals with as an entrepreneurial freedwoman (165). By making this connection, Keckley incorporates the colonial captivity narrative's element of mobility into both physical and social mobilities, interlacing classic tropes of captivity with those of sentimental novels and postbellum slave narratives.

Keckley begins traversing this "wilderness of freedom" between Chapter IV and Chapter XII, which encompasses colonial captivity narrative's "wandering" section. Here she explores Washington, DC, establishes a variety of meaningful relationships, and achieves her goal to sew for the First Lady. Her relationship with the Lincoln family is the centerpiece of this section, replacing the colonial captivity narrative's scenes of indigenous culture with scenes of the Lincolns' domestic life. Throughout this portion of her life, Keckley regularly uses the language of journeying to describe freedmen's transition into freedom. Moving away from antebellum metaphors for freedom that prioritize a "glorious promise," Keckley describes a laborious wandering full of troubles and trials: "Instead of flowery paths, days of perpetual sunshine, and bowers hanging with golden fruit, the road was rugged and full of thorns, the sunshine was eclipsed by shadows" (50). This is a reoccurring symbol in Keckley's text, particularly when she reflects on freedmen's perspectives on freedom:

Some of the freedmen and freedwomen had exaggerated ideas of liberty. To them it was a beautiful vision, a land of sunshine [and] rest . . . But it was natural that many of them should bitterly feel their disappointment. . . . [The colored people] make a home, and are so fond of it that they prefer it, squalid though it be, to the comparative ease and luxury of a shifting, roaming life. Well, the emancipated slaves, in coming North, left old associations behind them, and the love for the past was so strong that they could not find much beauty in the new life so suddenly opened to them. (62)

As Keckley recounts, hardships that came with freedom threatened to break the hopes of many freedmen. Instead of allowing this truth to dampen her own ambition, however, Keckley recognized the importance of teaching freedmen the benefits of travelling through such a menacing wilderness. She empathizes with their despair, but at the same time hopes to use her own story to demonstrate freedom's potential. She does so explicitly by including reassurances in

the text itself, but also by describing her own life as a “wilderness of events” that, though difficult, is ultimately worthwhile (7).

Along with metaphors of freedom as a journey, Keckley also incorporates death into generic landmarks within her text as is often done within the colonial captivity genre. Colonial captivity narratives are often punctuated with death, whether they be personal deaths, witnessed deaths, or moments of extreme danger where the captive is concerned for their own life (Derounian-Stodola xxi). As an archetypal example, Rowlandson’s narrative features several deaths throughout the captivity, beginning with the destruction of Rowlandson’s town and the death of her own child (Rowlandson 12, 17). Keckley also incorporates deaths throughout her text as landmarks to mark the reader’s progress through the story, including the Lincolns’ son Willie (Chapter VI), Keckley’s son George (also in Chapter VI), and President Lincoln himself (Chapter XI), each of which position the reader in history in much the same way Rowlandson does. While death alone is not unique to the colonial captivity narrative, there is a particularly interesting similarity between Keckley’s treatment of children’s deaths and Rowlandson’s. In *A True History*, both Rowlandson and her captor Weetamoo lose children within the narrative, a striking parallel to Mary Todd Lincoln and Keckley. Further, while Rowlandson’s grief is prominent in the text, Weetamoo’s is almost fully erased (Brooks 281-2). This similar elusion of grief is a space where Keckley incorporates another element of the captivity narrative: in spite of the similarities of their grief, captive and captor cannot grieve together (281). Though Keckley and Mary Lincoln exchange appropriate grieving rituals, their scenes of grief are carefully separated from each other, with Keckley’s almost completely absent from the text, referenced only as a method of displaying her empathy for the First Lady (Jepson 11). This parallel will continue to be developed in the next section of this chapter. But while Keckley’s story may reach its peak intensity there with the death of President Lincoln, there is a necessary element of “return” that Keckley must complete in order to close the arc of her story.

The last three chapters make up this closure, or “return” section: Keckley’s account of the Lincolns’ courtship (Chapter XIII), Keckley’s personal reunion with the Garlands (Chapter XIV), and a detailed explanation of the “Old Clothes Scandal” (Chapter XV). Together these three separate “returns” close the interwoven strands of Keckley’s narrative within a clear structure that leaves her reader content regardless of which element of her autobiography arrested their interest most. Keckley closes the book’s final chapter and the text as a whole discussing the “Old Clothes Scandal,” returning to the impetus of the text in order to fulfill the main goal of the narrative. By saving this element for last, Keckley closes the arc begun in the preface and satisfies her audience members reading for that purpose. In order to set up for this chapter, Keckley returns to the Garlands to close her own personal arc in Chapter XIV. Andrews discusses this element of the text in detail, incorporating Keckley’s personal story into a larger moment of postbellum slave narratives’ interest in turning away from the sectionalism of the past toward the possibility of forgiveness and reunification (28). Keckley’s journey back to the Garlands also fits the colonial captivity narrative closest, since the chapter brings her back to the relationships that she initially left as she embarked into the “wilderness” of freedom. However, since Keckley has reversed the traditional trajectory and associated the Garlands with captivity instead of freedom, there is still more to be analyzed in terms of Keckley’s thoughts on these relationships.

Even before Keckley closes her own personal arc, she reserves a chapter to step backward in time and revisit the story of Mary and Abraham Lincoln’s courtship in order to “reunite” them in Chapter XIII in the absence of a real reunion. Keckley understood that her position in history meant that her text would inevitably be used for Lincoln scholarship and memorabilia (Manuel 11). She may have been motivated by this awareness to provide her audience with a more optimistic perspective rather than ending with Lincoln’s death and Mary Todd Lincoln’s widowhood. However, I also wish to consider whether Keckley chose to include this reunion to draw narrative parallels between herself and the First Lady by giving Mary Lincoln a “return” of her own. The question of why Mary Lincoln receives such a prominent

place in the closure of Keckley's autobiography can therefore be explained in part by the structure of the colonial captivity narrative, but in order to be fully explored, this critical relationship must also be analyzed on its own.

Mary Todd Lincoln as Captor.

The relationship between Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln was the impetus for *Behind the Scenes* and remains a major reason for its revitalization. As Fleischner's pair of texts goes to show, both scholarly and popular readers are fascinated with interracial relationships that interrogate and generate nostalgia for the past (Fox 133). Keckley is clear from her first pages that her relationship with Mary Lincoln lies at the heart of the text—however, taking this relationship to be equally genuine is at best irresponsible, at worst dishonest. Though Keckley's main goal in the text was to defend the reputation of the First Lady, her mixed approach to this defense raises questions, and in some passages she is "so unsuccessful at eliciting the reader's sympathy that one cannot but notice her ambivalence" (Domina 66). Scenes of grieving are the places in the text where this juxtaposition becomes most explicit, where Keckley's unflinching portrayal of Mary Lincoln's grief is contrasted with her own composure (Sorasio 59). However, examples permeate the narrative outside of these scenes as well, making this question of genuity an important one to answer while considering the overall coherence of *Behind the Scenes*.

The relationship between Keckley and Mary Lincoln demonstrates many of the hallmarks of the coercive interracial "friendships" between white and African American women throughout the nineteenth century. These relationships, founded on dramatic disparities of social power, were meant to provide white women with emotional reassurance at the expense of African American women's psychological needs (Schuller 2). This expectation gave rise to stereotypes of invulnerable Black womanhood such as the "Mammy" who had no needs of her own and provided for her white slaveholding family with jovial submission (Robinson 59). Stereotypes that emphasized Black affection for their white slaveowners perpetuated the paternalistic idea that

that “slaveholder’s assumptions that affection shared between slaves and slaveholders negated any problematic aspects of slavery” (Domina 70). This paternalistic idealization of slavery was rampant throughout the American South and is addressed explicitly in a variety of slave narratives, particularly Jacobs’ *Incidents* (38-9). Keckley’s descriptions of her relationship with the First Lady fit Jacobs’ approach, even though Mary Lincoln was not a slaveowner herself. Several scholars writing on Mary Lincoln have identified her emotional reliance on her family’s female slaves, tying this relationship in to Keckley by pointing out Keckley’s comforting role in Mary Lincoln’s life (Fox 134, Morton 171, Berry 17). In this way Mary demonstrates that though Washington, DC is not a slave state, her expectations of the African American women around her still reflect her adolescent Southern attitudes.

However, these sorts of coercive relationships were not restricted to the slaveholding South—they were present in abolitionist circles in the North as well. Even in “free” states of the North, white middle class womanhood of the nineteenth century largely relied on their juxtaposition with working African American women and the value of their labor (Soriso 43). The culture of sentimental benevolence that allowed white women to participate in political issues such as abolitionism was built on a system of racial superiority that prioritized the ability to control one’s own emotional reactions and cultivate a superior emotional and moral sense (Schuller 2). This concept was instilled within slave systems but also translated into domestic free markets as well (Elam 223, Neary 103). Mary Lincoln’s example demonstrates this fluidity, as she grew up in a slave state yet became a supporter of abolitionism during her time in the White House (Dirck 36). Regardless of the ways her personal stance on slavery changed throughout her life, she retained an element of social power that allows her to exert power over Keckley—perhaps to a degree that warrants comparison with the captors of colonial captivity narratives.

The colonial captivity narrative’s long history of complicated relationships allows Keckley and Mary Lincoln’s ambiguous relationship to be seen with more nuance than is possible within other genres. Literature on the interpersonal conflicts between white and indigenous

groups flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, against the backdrop of destructive policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (Mielke 1-2). Borrowing methods of literary traditions such as sentimentalism, white and indigenous authors alike wrote about their navigation through these troubled relationships in an attempt to determine whether cross-cultural sympathy was feasible or ultimately doomed (Mielke 74, 88). Because of this strong focus on relationships, emotion, and moral choices, colonial captivity narratives were powerful propaganda used to defend US military actions such as the violent removal of indigenous communities from their ancestral homes (Mielke 7). This history contributes to the difficulties of analyzing captivity narratives, where fact often needs careful separation from fiction and fascinating portrayals are struck through with shameless racism. In both cases, however, the reader is encouraged to read with a critical eye, attempting to determine correct response in the face of extreme conflicts at the same time as the narrator. The audience's expectation for moral dilemma made the colonial captivity narrative an attractive genre for spiritual autobiographies and Puritan conversion narratives, and may have inspired Keckley's imagination as well as she considered how best to structure her personal story.

In this context, comparisons of the relationships between captor and narrator in Rowlandson's *A True History* and Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* reveal the texts' similar concerns. Both Weetamoo and Mary Todd Lincoln are of a social class much higher than the narrators of their textsⁱⁱⁱ and use this social standing to exert control over the narrator's lives, particularly their mobility. Weetamoo brings Rowlandson through the wilderness of New England, while Mary Lincoln brings Keckley through the social wilderness of Washington, DC, and on several trips around the US, a handful of which are recounted in the text (Keckley 76, 92-93, 120-121). Both Weetamoo and Mary Lincoln are also characterized by an impression of being a "severe and proud Dame" (Rowlandson 37). Whereas Weetamoo is colored by this impression throughout Rowlandson's text, Keckley purposefully seeks to undermine rumors of the First Lady's "ignorance and vulgarity," characterizing her instead with "grace and composure... calmness and

dignity” (Keckley 39). Yet, though Keckley ultimately tries to undo Mary Lincoln’s poor reputation, the two women are never able to truly empathize with each other in their grief. This moment of disconnect is pivotal in *A True History*, where Rowlandson reflects “there came a company to mourn and howl with [Weetamoo]: though I confess, I could not much condole with them” (Rowlandson 33). Keckley, likewise, undermines her own grief in an attempt to soothe Mary Lincoln—the only compassion she seems to receive is the kind appropriate for genteel womanhood, in stark contrast from Mary Lincoln’s expressions of her own grief (Keckley 47).

Elements of textual presence of each of these “captor” characters are also interesting to compare. Both Weetamoo and Mary Lincoln are associated with lavish, unusual clothes that their narrators remark on in detail (Rowlandson 37, Keckley 38-9, 66). Both narrators also have a personal hand in making these clothes. Though Rowlandson is nowhere near the intimate association of a modiste, sewing is a reoccurring element of her text that she uses to barter with the indigenous women around her—an interesting parallel to Keckley’s clientele networks (Rowlandson 31). Finally, both narrators include moments of embarrassment alongside their own activities and skills. Rowlandson reports how she “disgraced my master with begging” (Rowlandson 36), a scene comparable to Keckley’s own discussion of being denied food at the St. Denis hotel (Keckley 124-6). These similar scenes connect the textual presence of each of these “captors” with the settings they are invested in—both Rowlandson and Keckley are in a social position capable of either reaffirming or undermining the status of those above them. In combination with the overall structure of the text, these similarities provide a foundation for analyzing these two texts side-by-side in spite of their historical distance.

Though Mary Lincoln never intended to imprison or capture Keckley physically, contrasting her with these colonial captors offers a useful comparison for Keckley to encourage her audience to recognize the power disparity between Mary Lincoln and her modiste. By giving her readers insight into the relationship between herself and the First Lady, Keckley reveals the “at-once ritualized and invisibilized performance of white privilege [and] maternalism ... [which]

deploys fictive kinship ties ... to extract docility and submission” (Fox 131). Once this hollowness is revealed, Keckley’s “sunbeams and blossoms, in fact, subtly conjure the saccharinity, posture, and pretense of liberal racial sentimentality” (133). Scholars disagree on Mary Lincoln’s awareness of the coercive nature of her relationship with Keckley, with opinions ranging from defensive of the First Lady’s intentions (see Hogan and Fleischner) to critical of the idea any sort of intimacy could have been present at all (see Domina and Elam). Whether or not Mary Lincoln was conscious of the racialized expectations she brought to their relationship, Keckley understood the established norms of coercive interracial relationships such as theirs and the psychological exploitation they would demand (Elam 224, Fox 129). Using the elements of the colonial captivity narrative to place Mary Lincoln in a “captor” role, Keckley shares this authorial insight with her audience and reveals an intra-textual layer of the narrative that flows alongside her description of their friendship.

However, the assumed critical eye of the captivity narrative’s audience also made this genre a useful archetype to subvert for the reverse rhetorical effect. Where Rowlandson serves as the archetypal example of the colonial captivity narrative whose representation of the captor is entirely negative, Sarah Wakefield is an author publishing contemporaneously with Keckley who stands as an example of this reversal. Wakefield, like Keckley, wrote to “vindicate”: where Keckley sought to vindicate herself and Mary Lincoln, Wakefield sought to vindicate herself and her Lakota captor Chaska (Derounian-Stodola 241). Her text *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees* focuses on her experience as a captive during the US-Dakota War of 1862. *Six Weeks* is an interesting model in contrast to *A True History* because of the ways Wakefield portrays a honest and moral Chaska—a character who presents both the typical markers of “savagery” that stretch back to Rowlandson, yet who also demonstrates strong character and ultimately influences Wakefield’s perspective on the frontier conflict (239). The climax of the narrative takes place when three hundred and three Dakota men are imprisoned by white settlers and Wakefield is returned to her husband. Though having been returned to her husband, Wakefield continues to

invest herself in the conflict in order to defend Chaska and petition for his release. President Lincoln commuted the sentences of the indigenous prisoners in an unpopular move of his early presidency (238). However, in a combination of ignorance and racism, Chaska was one of the thirty-nine men hanged before the commute, executed in the place of another Dakota man with a similar name. Accusing the white authorities of his murder, Wakefield wrote *Six Weeks* in order to share her personal story of what had happened during the conflict and to bring the poor management of the issue to light (238). By reversing the historical trajectory of the colonial captivity narrative to defend her indigenous captor rather than the settler response, Wakefield demonstrates the effectiveness of the colonial captivity narrative structure to engage a critical audience. Yet Wakefield also serves as an example of the power of the colonial captivity narrative to encourage her readers to empathize with a character that they might otherwise struggle to understand. Regardless of Keckley's familiarity with Wakefield's specific text, the practice of using colonial captivity narratives as a subversive element is evidence of the genre's flexibility and adaptability to several independent interpretations.

The interpretive flexibility of the colonial captivity narrative may have drawn Keckley toward the framework as a means of incorporating both readings of Mary Lincoln as a friend and as a coercive mistress. By breaking away from traditions like the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, the colonial captivity genre opens up a new space through which to critically consider the morals and character of Mary Lincoln. Mary is not Stowe's white savior or Jacobs' white mistress—instead, she is positioned as a mix of good and bad qualities. When portraying Mary Lincoln as a narrative “captor,” Keckley accesses both the archetypal “Weetamoo” example and the subversive “Chaska” example at once. As a reader speculates on the morality of indigenous captors, the audience of *Behind the Scenes* is invited to speculate on the First Lady who so thoroughly captured Keckley's attention. This allows critiques of Mary Lincoln's coerciveness to stand alongside Keckley's defense of her integrity without one interpretation overwhelming the other. In fact, this invitation to criticize may be part of the reason *Behind the Scenes* suffered such

a poor reception (Elam 237). By humanizing the First Lady, Keckley was revealing far too much about the performativity of sentimental, genteel femininity—and in the same way, by pulling back the veil from the Lincolns, she was revealing far too much about the performativity of white racial superiority as a whole (Soriso 56, Adams 77, Fox 139). White dependence on Black reassurance for proof of its own superiority proved too damning a “truth” for the American reading public to accept.

However, Keckley does not humanize Mary Lincoln in her text to condemn her; instead, Keckley’s honest look into their relationship makes room to deconstruct the coercive relationships between white and African American women in a newly reunited nation (Elam 228). While their differences provide stark contrast, their similarities as grieving mothers and social outsiders of Washington, DC polite society result in their label of “comrades,” and complicate both positive and negative readings (Fox 136). By giving Mary Lincoln the role of “Other” that would typically be ascribed to African Americans, she shows how their paradoxical relationship demonstrates the performativity of the First Lady’s whiteness. Keckley portrays both herself and Mary Lincoln as “outsiders” to compare, in spite of their power imbalance, how both women are still doing their best to adhere to those standards of domesticity in spite of a hostile public (Hogan 196, 208). This reading complements Fleischner’s psychoanalytic evaluation of their relationship as “secret sharers, doubles in mourning and emotional valuation of possessions” (*Mastering Slavery* 102), while still leaving room for the necessary critiques of Mary Lincoln’s role in the text.

When Keckley’s critiques stand alongside her honest descriptions of Mary Todd Lincoln’s attempts at genteel femininity, Keckley’s overall goal of defending the First Lady’s reputation is held intact as a necessary complement to her own story. She seeks to show not only how she was able to succeed in spite of her own enslavement, but also to show how relationships between white and African American women might be rebuilt post-slavery, if white women are willing to acknowledge the ways their own privileges were reliant on African American women’s

labor. From her relationships with the Garland women, to her white clientele across the country, to her friendship with the First Lady, to the disappointment of the freedwoman who recognizes the false promises of white women's plantation maternalism, Keckley places these fraught interracial relationships at the center of her discussion of freedom and agency. Or, as Sorisio explains, "[Keckley's] pattern of juxtaposing the narratives of white and African American women ... demonstrates the importance of interrogating the relationship between white and black womanhood in the reconstructing nation" (50). With each of these examples in mind, Keckley does not set out to vilify her previous employer, but to use honesty to reveal the truth about both halves of this troubled relationship so that future white and African American women will be able to meet each other as subjects.

Author as Observer, Keckley as Subject.

Through the act of writing, Keckley's story becomes history that articulates and defines freedwomen's transition from passive objects to subjects. African American women's writing has long been concerned with "portraying African American women not as objects but as human subjects ... [by modifying] traumatic memories to precisely control and invest textual scenes of violence with their desires for self-mastery" (204). This attempt to regain control of otherwise powerless positions is a similarity shared amongst narrators of captivity narratives of all stripes. But in order to move from "what the text means [to] how it means" (Berthold 75), this meaning must also be discussed in terms of formal tactics. By rejecting the focus on violence and vengeance associated with slave narratives, Keckley also escapes the damaging associations of Blackness with trauma and injury, creating space for new identification with growth, health, and potential (Neary 98). Incorporating genres outside of the slave narrative allows Keckley to take a step beyond subject-hood to build a "heroic narrative that seeks to eliminate her victim status in exchange for a status of self-reliant womanhood" (Tweedy 213). Using the colonial captivity narrative structure in particular, Keckley creates a model for freedwomen after her to identify

themselves as the “central figures in their own narratives” regardless of whether their name will be the most recognizable on the page (Lewis 193). The intentions of *Behind the Scenes* are unified with the structure, content, and style of the text. Each of these elements points to Keckley as the main focus of her text, an author who retains authorial control of her narrative regardless of what she puts her energy toward. Ultimately, it is critical to acknowledge the coherency of Keckley’s text because the text itself emphasizes the coherency of Keckley’s life. By deepening the scholarship on her autobiography, knowledge of the character of Keckley herself also deepens, and with it the recognition of African American women’s influence on American history, whether on stage or behind it.

Keckley’s delayed arrival within the larger tradition of African American women writers can be explained in part by her unique complication of agency as it is typically presented in slave narratives. While the first quarter of Keckley’s narrative adheres to the slave narrative structure, the latter half of her narrative caused early scholars to dismiss Keckley’s story to focus on the Lincolns instead. This scholarly blind spot is what makes this acknowledgement of Keckley’s borrowing of alternative generic structures critical to the analysis of her text—it allows Keckley to be an agent and an observer at the same time. Many scholars have done excellent work to demonstrate the importance of the language we use to describe African American women autobiographers as the agents of their own stories, including Foster, Santamarina, and hooks. Yet identifying Keckley’s agency as *only* action-based often results in the generic “splitting” of her own story from Mary Lincoln’s, such as focusing only on the slave narrative element of the text (Tweedy), or discussing her life with the Lincolns without a broader discussion of how this impacts the formal structure (Domina). To contribute to this scholarly conversation, I seek to harmonize Keckley’s whole text with this sense of agency. Li’s framework of “intra-independence” allows contemporary readers to conceptualize freedom not only as an escape but also as the building of a framework that allows for mobility and agency *within* the narrator’s context (18). The colonial captivity narrative is a key comparison in this case because of the

ideological importance of who writes and who is written about. Not only are these roles visible and intentional, but often white women have purposefully used the genre to naturalize themselves as parts of their new nation. For this reason, colonial captivity narratives, like slave narratives, are also a critical genre where “understanding the motivations of the narrator versus the role of the protagonist is crucial to understanding the functions of various racial dilemmas” (Tweedy 206). Like the authors of colonial captivity narratives, Keckley’s “intent in writing an autobiography lies beyond a story of escape from and condemnation of the institution of slavery. Rather, she provides an autobiographical claim to the fundamental principles of American citizenship: bodily autonomy and self-hood” (212).

Keckley’s unique textual structure should not imply that she is not the center of her narrative; instead, when identifying that Keckley is the center of her text and reading from that foundation, new generic possibilities become possible. As Lewis states, it is “the union of [Keckley and the Lincolns’] stories into a singular narrative” that positions Keckley as an authority on both slavery and freedom, which points forward to the fact that an analysis of this text is incomplete without an analysis of the union which makes its structure possible (192). At her point of history, freedmen needed texts that could reassure them that their perspectives were meaningful and valuable not in spite of their pasts but in context with them. Further, recalibrating the language of scholarship to view *Behind the Scenes* as a “major contribution to (rather than departure from) the slave-narrative tradition [and] recognizing Keckley’s appropriation of the genre’s authenticating strategies exposes her sophisticated textual intervention” (Neary 94). With this approach, *Behind the Scenes* has the potential to provide new insights into conversations about narrative voice in a variety of different traditions and historical periods. Most importantly, Keckley remains a passionate voice speaking from and for free Black communities of the Reconstruction era, embodying their hopes for themselves and the variety of approaches individuals could take toward freedom. She did not allow herself to be a passive observer—she was an *active* observer, watching and learning.

Keckley's freedom extends through the novel instead of remaining only in the climax – the whole narrative explores freedom as she explores it, rather than instilling it only as a goal to reach. The meaning of her text also impacts this sense of agency as well. As Domina writes, “Keckley’s audience would read her book in order to see what she had seen rather than to experience what she had experienced” (62). Keckley understood that the parts of her story could not be compressed only into the slave narrative or sentimental form without leaving out critical elements of her story. Instead of compromising on her own story, she uses the captivity narrative structure in order to bridge the gaps between the slave narrative and the sentimental novel. This unique combination demonstrates that, like a wilderness, freedom is a new world teeming with challenge and potential. Keckley synthesizes her role as observer with her position as an African American woman writing to reassure her audience that their voices are valuable “not only as witnesses, but as active protagonists” (Manuel 13). In other words, Keckley’s story demonstrates that individuals can be both witnesses and active protagonists. As one cohesive unit, *Behind the Scenes* proves that regardless of the path freedmen take to self-determinacy or how others may respond to them, they remain the core of their story at every step. Keckley offers her own autobiography as a guide, demonstrating how to observe and absorb information from the “wilderness of freedom” around them, just as Americans had been doing for centuries.

ⁱ I refer to both Rowlandson and Wakefield’s narratives as “colonial captivity narratives” because they follow the same archetypal structure popularized in the seventeenth century, even though Wakefield’s text was published in the nineteenth century. Though not located in the “colonial” era of American history prior to the Revolutionary War, Wakefield can still appropriately be called a “colonial” narrator because of her status as a white (settler) colonial woman living on indigenous land. “Colonial” in this case is not referring to a historical period, but works as a status marker as opposed to “indigenous.” For more detail on this differentiation, see Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2012, p. 1-40.

ⁱⁱ Though this conflict was in fact deadly, this description should be taken with a grain of salt. Drake’s explanation of this reference to Metacom’s War encapsulates its problems well:

“Although King Philip's War was certainly no less violent than America's other wars, the notion that it fell within "American" or "our" history is problematic. It should spark an obvious question, one asked by humans throughout the ages, How wide is the circle of

we? ... Is it just the English colonists who are part of our history, or are Indians included as well, even though many of them resisted colonial authority? ... Raising such questions makes it clear that defining a society—especially one that spans three hundred years of history and includes widely varying Indian cultures and groups of English colonists with divergent purposes, all in the context of the emerging and maturing United States—is no easy matter.” (4-6)

ⁱⁱⁱ This is in regard to Weetamoo’s social standing within her own indigenous community, as is explored by Brooks’ *Our Beloved Kin*. Rowlandson, the wife of a minister, was a powerful captive because of her position within the society of white settlers present in New England at the time. Derounian-Stodola reflects on this disparity:

“As a colonist and a Puritan minister’s wife with the title Mistress—a counterpart to her husband’s “Mister”—Rowlandson was far more used to exerting power over the Indians than having them exert it over her. Nonetheless, as a captive, she realized very quickly that the status quo had changed and her captors had the upper hand.” (4)

Rowlandson also did not understand the social nuances of the community she was surrounded by, and for this reason mistakes (and misrepresents) Weetamoo’s status as a wife (Brooks 257). However, Rowlandson’s narration in this case should not undermine Weetamoo’s social power in the context of Rowlandson’s captivity. For more detail on this aspect of their relationship, see Brooks 253-267.

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Vita

Hannah R. Gautsch received her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Mary Washington in 2019. She earned departmental honors in English upon graduation and was awarded the Laura V. Sumner Award for Excellence in Classics. She has worked as a student tutor in the Robert E. Hemenway Writing Center and as a graduate TA for the University of Kentucky while completing her degree.