

**Elise Vallier**

African American Women Educators North and South: The life writings of Charlotte Forten, Suzie King Taylor, Kate Drumgoold and Mary Church Terrell (1861-1900)

**Résumé :** Cet article explore les expériences de vie de quatre enseignantes africaines-américaines dans les États du Nord et du Sud des États-Unis entre 1861 et 1900, à travers l'étude de récits de vie tels que des journaux intimes, autobiographies et mémoires. Après avoir expliqué la méthodologie retenue, l'article s'ouvre sur l'analyse des diverses motivations de ces quatre femmes. Ensuite, les expériences quotidiennes de ces enseignantes dans leurs divers lieux d'exercice sont étudiées. Dans une dernière partie est analysée l'importance de la classe sociale et de l'appartenance régionale dans l'expérience de vie et d'enseignement de ces quatre femmes. Il apparaît que certaines d'entre elles pouvaient avoir une image préconçue de l'autre région.

**Mots-clés :**

Femmes – Africains-Américains, – Éducation – Guerre de Sécession – Reconstruction – Journaux intimes – Autobiographies

**Abstract :** This article explores the life experiences of four African American women who worked as teachers in both the North and South of the United States between 1861 and 1900, through the study of life narratives such as diaries, autobiographies and memoirs. After a brief explanation of the adopted methodology, the first part shows that the motivations of these four female teachers were quite diverse and often rooted in a strong racial consciousness. Then, the article delves into these women's everyday experiences in both the North and the South of the country. Lastly, this work examines the importance of social class and region in these four women's teaching experiences. It demonstrates how some of them could have preconceived ideas about the other region.

**Keywords :**

Women – African Americans – Education – Civil War – Reconstruction – Diaries – Autobiographies – Memoirs

**Référence électronique**

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# African American Women Educators North and South: The life writings of Charlotte Forten, Suzie King Taylor, Kate Drumgoold and Mary Church Terrell (1861-1900)

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In his 2010 study on African American educators in the South, historian Ronald Butchart has proven that the number of women of African descent who worked as teachers between 1861 and 1900 was much superior to what was hitherto believed.<sup>1</sup> In fact, many black women from both the North and the South left more or less comfortable situations and did not hesitate to travel thousands of miles in order to educate African Americans during the American Civil War and up to the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

How and why did these women become teachers during this period of major changes for the African American community? What situations did they face as educators? How did they perceive political and social events occurring at that time? Among these women, a few left accounts such as diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs which provide some answers to these questions. These invaluable personal narratives not only help historians understand these women's motivations and life experiences; but they also show these teachers' great dynamism and unabated determination. Personal writings offer historians the opportunity to give these women their voices back – voices which, for a long time, remained unheard in American history.

Two distinct forms of writings are used in this study: Charlotte Forten's diary and three autobiographical writings by Kate Drumgoold, Susie King Taylor, and Mary Church Terrell. Diaries — defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a book in which one keeps a daily records of events and experiences” – offer twenty-first century readers a window in nineteenth century women's intimate thoughts and personal reflections. This form of writing is specific because it projects the thoughts of the diarist soon after the event that is recounted. The lapse of time can be very short – a few minutes – or longer – a few months or years in certain cases. Margo Culley terms this type of writing “writing of the instant.”<sup>3</sup> It is a precious source of information about women's private worlds.<sup>4</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2010. See preface, p. ix-xx and appendix B for details.

<sup>2</sup> I focus on the period starting from the beginning of the war (1861) until the early twentieth century, after Jim Crow legislation had been enforced in the South (The Jim Crow era started in the 1870s and did not end until the end of Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s).

<sup>3</sup> Margo Culley, *A Day at a time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1794 to the Present*, New York, Feminist P, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to diaries left untouched after being written, not diaries such as Mary Chestnut's that were rewritten and rearranged years later. The existence of the diary could be kept secret but it could also be disclosed to family members. For instance, the white diarist Kate Stone read her Civil War journal to her

case of Forten, she mostly kept her diary to herself and did not seem to exert any sort of self-censorship since she did not intend to publish it.<sup>5</sup> The diary became a place where she could express her personal and political voice. Rhetoric scholar Kimberly Harrison explains that “[t]he personal spaces of women’s diaries provided room for rhetorical rehearsals and allowed women to persuade themselves that they could and should take on the new roles thrust upon them.”<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, life narratives such as memoirs, reminiscences and autobiographies (which sometimes partly belonged to the genre of the slave narrative, as in the case of Kate Drumgoold) constitute what the French literary scholar Jean-Philippe Miraux has termed “*l’écriture a posteriori*” (*a posteriori* writing).<sup>7</sup> Compared to the diary, a longer period of time usually goes by between the events and their recounting. This difference is important because it may inform the content and the style of the writing. Both types of primary sources evoke historical events and personal thoughts but in different ways, thus providing a distinct look upon history – race relations or economic struggles, in this case. The autobiography is, according to the French specialist of the autobiography Philippe Lejeune, “a retrospective in prose which a real person makes of his or her own existence, when he or she places the emphasis on his or her individual life, in particular on the history of his or her personality.”<sup>8</sup> While memoirs place the emphasis on historical events, external to the person, autobiographies and reminiscences reveal elements of the writer’s private life and are centered on the self. In addition, memoirs are historically valuable because they lay “at the crossroads of memory and history”, as historian Jennifer Wallach suggests in her book entitled *Closer to the Truth than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory and Jim Crow*. To her, a memoir is always a construction and builds a bridge between memory and history. But its main richness rests upon the fact that it enables the historian to learn “a great deal about the way an individual perceived him or herself and his or her times (if the witness’s misrepresentation is honest) or about how the individual would like to be remembered.”<sup>9</sup>

In the case of autobiographical writings, notes written *a posteriori* are informed by the passage of time. The context of publication also has a major importance. The writer may have changed over time, may have experienced other periods of history, and these changes may alter his or her style: they can be more or less nostalgic, angry, happy or

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offspring in the late nineteenth century and Gertrude Thomas wrote in 1859 that she wished her grandchildren to remember her: “For my girl or girls should I have others, these pages are penned,” she wrote. *The Secret Eye, The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 1990, p. 167. See the studies by Béatrice Didier or Kimberly Harrison on the diary. Didier argues that the notion of secrecy is not scientific and she asks: “Isn’t the reader always here, after all?” *Le Journal intime*, Paris, PUF, 2002, p. 8 (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Yet, parts of her diary were disclosed during the war because the “abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier, a friend and supporter of Charlotte’s, published excerpts of her journal she had sent him that chronicled ‘Life on the Sea Islands’ in the May and June 1864 issues of *Atlantic Monthly*.” Karen M. Davis, “Charlotte Lottie Forten Grimké (1837-1914),” *African-American Authors, 1745-1945: A Bio-Biographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, Westport, Greenwood P, 2000, p. 200.

<sup>6</sup> Kimberly Harrison, “Rhetorical Rehearsals: The Construction of Ethos in Confederate Women’s Civil War Diaries,” *Rhetoric Review* 22 / 3 (2003), p. 243-263.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Philippe Miraux, *L’Autobiographie: écriture de soi et sincérité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Wallach, *Closer to the Truth than any Fact: Memoir, Memory and Jim Crow*, Athens, U of Georgia P, 2008, p. 31.

disappointed.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Kate Drumgoold published her autobiography in 1898, at the heart of the Jim Crow era when black men were being disenfranchised. Suzie King Taylor published her reminiscences in 1906 (the year of the Atlanta race riot) at the height of racial strife. Active in the Union Veterans' association, she deplored the lack of patriotism and the inertia of younger African Americans. Mary Church Terrell, who was influential in several associations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), published her autobiography in 1940. She aimed at inspiring other women to continue the fight. In short, four very different women who taught at distinct historical moments offer personal testimonies which are representative of specific, individual trajectories. Through the analysis of such personal histories emerges a collective history of African American women in the post-Civil War era.

The aim of this article is to analyze, compare, and contrast the experiences of four women educators who taught in the North and in the South between 1861 and 1900. These four women faced very different contexts: two of them – Forten and King – taught newly freedmen and women in the South during the conflict and shortly after the Civil War, and enjoyed a protection which the two other women did not, precisely because they worked – at least temporarily – as teachers either through a missionary association or through the Union army. Drumgoold taught in West Virginia in the 1880s while Terrell taught in the 1870s and 1880s outside the South exclusively.

Charlotte Forten, a Northerner, was born into an affluent Philadelphia family in 1837. She was twenty-five when she left for South Carolina. In her now famous diary, published in 1988 and entitled *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, she describes her life on Saint Helena Island in South Carolina between 1862 and 1864.<sup>11</sup> Susie King Taylor was born a slave in Georgia. At age fourteen, she fled toward Union lines on Saint Simons Island in 1862. At Camp Saxton in Beaufort, South Carolina, Taylor worked alternately as a teacher, laundress, nurse, and cook.<sup>12</sup> She then taught in Savannah, Georgia, during the 1870s and later worked as a cook. She published her memoir, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman's Civil War Memoir*, in 1906. Kate Drumgoold, the author of *A Slave Girl's Story: Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* published in 1898, came to live in Brooklyn at age seven — after her mother settled there with her family – and she identified the urban North as her home. After completing her education in Washington, DC, she worked as a teacher for eleven years in Virginia and West

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<sup>10</sup> In the case of the WPA interviews conducted during the Great Depression among former slaves, the context of the interviews surely influenced their contents. Some former slaves evoked slavery with nostalgia because they remembered having enough to eat when living on their former masters' plantation, precisely because they were now experiencing hunger and poverty due to the major economic crisis of the 1930s. Not all of them did, though, and it is more than probable that they would not have given such interviews in the late 1860s or in the 1890s.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Forten, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1988. A previous version of the journals had been published in 1953: *The Journal of Charlotte Forten: A Free Negro in the Slave Era*, ed. Ray Allen Billington, New York, Norton, 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman's Civil War Memoir*, [1906] Athens, U of Georgia P, 2006. Taylor was a laundress at Camp Saxton in Beaufort, SC, in October 1862 and later became a nurse and a cook in June 1864 (p. 15, 33-34). She then refers to being "officially enrolled as company laundress" but confides doing little of it as she was "always busy doing other things through camp" (p. 35).

Virginia<sup>13</sup>. Finally, Mary Church Terrell was from Memphis, Tennessee. She was the daughter of wealthy entrepreneurs.<sup>14</sup> As one of the first African American women to obtain a B.A. from Oberlin College, she had a unique experience. She taught in the mid-1880s in Wilberforce College in Ohio and in the highly reputed Colored High School in Washington, DC. She published her autobiography, entitled *A Colored Woman in A White World*, in 1940.

In this article, I will first explore the various reasons why these four women decided to become teachers. Then, I will describe and compare their life experiences as educators in the North and in the South at different periods of American history. Finally, I will examine the extent to which class, gender, race, and region were important elements in shaping these teachers' life experiences far from their social milieu.

### **The roots of these women teachers' commitment**

How and why did these women become teachers? First, they were able to teach because, unlike the majority of African American women in their time, all four women were literate. In that regard, these women were exceptional.<sup>15</sup> Charlotte Forten belonged to Philadelphia's black elite and was therefore privately tutored at home before attending an integrated school in Salem, Massachusetts. Mary Church Terrell also grew up as a privileged child in Memphis, Tennessee. On the contrary, the slave-born Suzie King Taylor learned to read and write in secret because, at that time, teaching a slave how to read and write was prohibited and severely punished in the slave South. Moreover, she managed to become literate because, contrary to most southern blacks, she lived in an urban area of the South. When Captain Whitmore of the Union army expressed his surprise upon learning that Suzie King Taylor was literate, she explained that "the only difference [with other negroes in the South] is that they have been reared in the country and I in the city."<sup>16</sup> Kate Drumgoold also learnt reading and writing in secret. Despite their differences in social and geographical backgrounds, all of these women were raised in families who highly prized education and, as a result, all shared a love for education and wished to use this knowledge for the benefit of the larger African American community.

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<sup>13</sup> Kate Drumgoold, "A Slave Girl's Story: Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold," [1898] *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection*, ed. Norman Yetman, Mineola, Dover Thrift Editions, 2002. It seems that she started teaching in West Virginia in 1886. She taught at a school in Woodstock, Shenandoah County, Virginia and later taught at Hinton, West Virginia.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, [1940] London, G.K. & Co, 1996. Her mother was a successful businesswoman who made a fortune in the 1870s as a fashionable hairdresser, while her father Robert Church made profitable investments in real estate following the Memphis yellow fever epidemic of 1878.

<sup>15</sup> "Black literacy rates rose rapidly, from an estimated 5%-10% under slavery to 50% in 1910. Among black people born after 1860, literacy rates were even higher." Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, "'Somewhere' in the Nadir of African American History, 1890-1920," *Freedom's Story*, TeacherServe®, National Humanities Center, <[http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/nadir.htm#\\_edn5](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/nadir.htm#_edn5)> [last accessed 14 February 2014], copyright National Humanities Center.

<sup>16</sup> S.K. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 9.

Secondly, most African American women worked out of necessity. When they happened to be literate, they could hope to become elementary school teachers. During the Civil War, African Americans were given opportunities to go south and teach through institutions such as the American Missionary Association (AMA) and the Freedmen's Bureau – a federal program created in 1865 in order to aid former slaves on a wide range of issues: getting education, signing labor contracts, obtaining legal protection, finding relatives, etc. Run by northern agents, the Bureau helped found several black schools, colleges, and Universities.<sup>17</sup> In that case, they could hope to earn regular incomes, even if these were not sufficient. Teaching often stemmed from a real financial necessity. As Ronald Butchart explains, many northern black women who enrolled in the AMA did so mainly to earn a salary. In her study of black women during the Civil War, Ella Forbes also states that “it was often true in the case of teachers” that they had to “work outside the home through necessity” as “racial oppression against African American males meant that they often did not have access to properly compensated employment” and thus were not able to be the sole providers for their family.<sup>18</sup> Because of economic subjugation, black men thus found themselves unable to secure sufficient income. This forced many southern and northern women – literate or not – to work outside the home. What is more, some black women could not earn regular or sufficient wages because they had to take care of sick relatives or family members.<sup>19</sup>

In his study, Ronald Butchart explains that a third reason motivated these educators: “The two themes that ring through nearly every black teacher’s application to teach were: ‘racial solidarity and racial uplift and elevation.’”<sup>20</sup> His remarks apply to all four women in this study: all of them had a strong sense of responsibility towards the African American community.<sup>21</sup> An anti-slavery activist, Charlotte Forten had published several poems in defense of freedom in 1858 and 1860.<sup>22</sup> Strongly committed to helping the race, Forten wrote in 1862 that she simply considered that it was “her duty” to go south.<sup>23</sup> Very determined not to let anything prevent her from going and deeply disappointed by her rejection at the Boston Educational Commission, she finally received her commission to go South with the Port Royal Relief Association of Philadelphia.<sup>24</sup> When warned that

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<sup>17</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau – often alongside the AMA – provided financial support to found several black schools such as Howard University in Washington, DC, Fisk University, Tougaloo College, Clark Atlanta University, Dillard University, to name only a few. For instance, Howard University was named after General O.O. Howard, one of the most important agents – commissioner – of the Freedmen's Bureau.

<sup>18</sup> Ella Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War*, New York, Garland, 1998, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> See the example in Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, Norton, 1984. The monthly salary of \$10 provided by the AMA often did not prove sufficient. Sterling shows that some black women wrote to the recruiters of the AMA in order to obtain a better salary because the amount proposed by the AMA was too low.

<sup>20</sup> R. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> The term “duty” often appears in these women's writings, as well as in the writings by middle- and upper-class black women. Race uplift was a major concern for both men and women in the black community. See for instance the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, Josephine St Pierre Ruffin and the women of the National Association of Colored Women – founded in 1896. See in particular the NACW's *National Notes*.

<sup>22</sup> See for example her poems “Wind among the Poplars” (1859) and “A Slave Girl's Prayer” (1860).

<sup>23</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 376.

<sup>24</sup> The Boston Educational Commission and the Port Royal Relief Association of Philadelphia were organized to assist freedmen and women residing in the Sea Islands. Such associations blossomed in the North during the war. The Port Royal Relief Association was later renamed the Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association and

these missions were occurring in potentially dangerous areas in times of war, these volunteers responded that they were ready to face risks. Their determination was so strong that for instance, in the winter of 1862, Forten wrote that she was ready to go “at any cost.”<sup>25</sup> Later on, on March 24, 1863, as she was about to be sent to Florida to teach black soldiers in a territory not yet secured by the Union army, she ignored potential problems, claiming: “I shall enjoy the spice of danger.”<sup>26</sup> She additionally emphasized the fact that she had enrolled in an act of selflessness. She wrote: “It was for no selfish motive that I came here, far from the few who are so dear to me. . . . Let the work to which I have solidly pledged myself fill up my whole existence to the exclusion of all main longings.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, she wrote: “If I go, it will be to teach the soldiers. I shall like that. So much depends upon these men. If I can help them in any way I shall be glad to do so.”<sup>28</sup> Considering that the black soldiers’ mission was crucial for the fate of African Americans, she was ready to sacrifice her safety and comfort. She also expressed her political activism in the classroom by teaching about black heroes such as “the noble Toussaint [L’Ouverture]” . She thought “it [was] well that they should know what one of their own color could do for his race.”<sup>29</sup>

These women were also inspired by their times: keenly aware that the Civil War or Reconstruction represented momentous periods, they decided to play a part in history. Historical circumstances clearly pushed Charlotte Forten and Suzie King Taylor to act rapidly. An anti-slavery sympathizer, Charlotte Forten felt the urge to become an educator in the South during the summer of 1862. She expressed her impatience after her first application had been rejected. As the promise of emancipation for their people drew nearer, some of these women resolved to commit themselves to the cause of freedom. Indeed, during the summer of 1862, the conflict was clearly becoming a war for African American freedom. Lincoln decided to deal a blow to the South’s economy by emancipating slaves in the rebellious States, thus giving the war a new turn of events. That summer, Foner explains, “Lincoln concluded that emancipation had become a political and military necessity.”<sup>30</sup> Drumgoold’s devotion to black education was so strong that she retrospectively wrote: “I was willing to go to prepare to die for my people, for I could not rest till my people were educated.”<sup>31</sup> This evinces a strong commitment to a wider community of African Americans, as Ronald Butchart argues: “For the black teachers, education was intended to extend and secure emancipation”. To them, education mainly represented access to cultural progress, and economic and political freedom. “At its heart,” he further claims, “the teachers’ expectation of racial elevation through education implied moving their race toward equality, raising them to a higher social and economic plane, and inscribing them within boundaries previously denied to them. . . . There is a sharp

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sent some sixty teachers to the South from 1864 to 1868. In addition, numerous African American philanthropists and militant or religious organizations funded such enterprises. The role of the Church, especially the Baptist Church, was particularly important to bring relief to African Americans. See Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty! An American History*, New York, Norton, 2012, p. 516.

<sup>31</sup> K. Drumgoold, “A Slave Girl’s Story”, p. 123.

difference in perspective, expectation, and vision between black teachers and most white teachers, whether southern or northern.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, African American teachers were deeply aware that education guaranteed more freedom and political empowerment for African Americans. The correlation between education, literacy, and enfranchisement became blatant when all southern states passed legislation imposing literacy tests and other restrictive measures in the 1880s for all voters, in order to disenfranchise African American citizens. Literate women thus decided to help newly emancipated slaves – eager to get an education – because they wanted to help all African Americans prove to the wider society that they could have a place in the nation. All black teachers were aware that offering literacy and education to as many members of the community as possible was a major guarantee against political and economic subjugation as well as social ostracism.

Most women of color in the United States developed a high level of racial consciousness. In a country dominated by the white majority, African American women were indeed constantly reminded of their skin color, whether they lived in the North or in the South. For instance, Forten reported that she had been a victim of racism in 1862 Boston<sup>33</sup>. Indeed all four women in this study were victims of racial discrimination in their everyday lives. They were able to work exclusively in “colored schools” where they received lower wages. In addition, they were segregated in public transportation and public places. Racial segregation had existed for a long time in the South, where it was institutionalized in the 1880s and 1890s. Yet, African Americans also experienced segregation in the North, for example on public transportation in northern cities like Philadelphia in the 1860s.<sup>34</sup> Whether northern or southern, racially based differential treatment discrimination was thus a reality for all African Americans. Segregation, humiliations and racial hatred reinforced African American women’s racial identity and consciousness.<sup>35</sup> Literate well-off northern and southern African American women felt closely bound to former slaves in spite of their social differences because they viewed racism as a national problem that affected African Americans as a whole. Aware that education was a powerful tool to fight against social and political inequality, they were thus committed to fostering it as best they could.

What is more, these women’s family backgrounds enhanced their racial consciousness from their early childhood. Family traditions of resistance and struggle for black freedom were often passed on to these educators. For example, Suzie Taylor’s actions

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<sup>32</sup> R. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 369, 363. A man “took umbrage at sitting at the same table with one whose skin chanced to be ‘not colored like his own’, and rose and left the table.” Forten adds sarcastically: “Poor man! He feared contamination.” She also writes critically about racial discrimination in Philadelphia, as in June 1862 about the “so-called City of Brotherly Love”: “What a mockery that name is!” (p. 363)

<sup>34</sup> In the 1860s, several African Americans decided to sue several railroad companies in the North and in the West – in Philadelphia and San Francisco, for example. Mrs Derry of Philadelphia and Charlotte Brown of San Francisco filed lawsuits in 1863-1867. See Judith Ann Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2009. Racial segregation was validated by the United States Supreme Court in the Civil Rights’ Cases of 1883. In addition to ruling that each State could define its policy regarding segregation, this decision also made racial segregation a personal matter, stating that individuals could choose to refuse to serve or accommodate certain customers based on their personal beliefs, which made it legal for Americans to discriminate against people for racial reasons.

<sup>35</sup> The example of Ida B. Wells’ 1884 lawsuit shows how black women, tired of racial discrimination, , humiliation and attack on their dignity, decided to exert legal pressures. Being constantly reminded of their skin color, they could not ignore their racial identity.



were part of a family tradition toward liberation. Five of her forefathers were in the Revolutionary war. Charlotte Forten's forefather, James Forten Senior, had also been a soldier at the time of the American Revolution.<sup>36</sup> Some were born in activist families. For example, Forten was the daughter of the anti-slavery lecturer Robert Forten. From the time she was young, she heard discussions in her family and in friends' circles; she attended receptions during which slavery and freedom were discussed. As a result, she was familiar with William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and other leading abolitionists of the day. Indeed, on several occasions, she refers to meeting or hearing Douglass or Garrison at home.<sup>37</sup> Their influence was so significant that Forten confided that she wanted a career as an anti-slavery lecturer like her role model, Sarah Parker Remond.<sup>38</sup> The person who advised her to travel to Port Royal, South Carolina, to teach the contraband slaves was John Greenleaf Whittier, a friend of the family.<sup>39</sup> A New England Quaker poet and an ardent advocate of immediate abolitionism, he played a decisive role in Forten's involvement in missionary work. On August 9, 1862, Forten reports: "he is very desirous that I should go. I shall certainly take his advice."<sup>40</sup> As African American studies scholar Brenda Stevenson explains in her introduction to the *Journals*, "James Forten and his wife, Charlotte Sr. (1784-1884), taught their children to take responsibility both for their lives and for the fate of their race. Scholarship, morality, achievement, selfless dedication to the improvement of the political and economic conditions of blacks — these were the important elements of the socialization process that took place at 92 Lombard Street during Charlotte's childhood as well as during her father's."<sup>41</sup> Additionally, "Robert Forten Jr. was deeply committed to his race and dedicated to efforts to improve the status of blacks in America. It was a commitment that his father demanded of him and that he expected of his daughter."<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Forten's father encouraged his daughter to become a teacher. He believed "[t]his profession . . . would give [her] some practical skills with which to aid her race, for there were few well-trained teachers available to the black community."<sup>43</sup> She obeyed her father's wish and rapidly engaged in teaching after graduation. She wrote: "I will spare no effort to become what he desires that I should be; . . . to prepare myself well for the responsible duties of a teacher, and to live for the good that I can do my oppressed and suffering fellow-creatures."<sup>44</sup> Being in contact with abolitionists and the early American feminists during her childhood made her sensitive to the cause of slaves and women. What is more, it was not just tolerated in her family for a woman to be socially and politically active, it was actually encouraged. There were many examples of such activism in her family. Her aunts Margaretta, Sarah, and Harriet were

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<sup>36</sup> S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 1. James Forten Senior was a powder-boy during the War of Independence.

<sup>37</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 506.

<sup>38</sup> On July 28, 1854, she wrote in her journal: "I often say that I should like to be an Anti-Slavery lecturer" (*ibid.*, p. 91). See also Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, "To Get an Education and to Teach my People," *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life: Their words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings*, eds. Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, University Park, Pennsylvania State UP, 1976, p. 284.

<sup>39</sup> The term "Contraband slaves" referred to African Americans who had fled their owners and arrived in Union army camps during the Civil War. This term was coined by Benjamin Butler, a famous Union general.

<sup>40</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 374.

<sup>41</sup> Brenda Stevenson, "Introduction," C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. See the diary entry dated October 23, 1854 (*ibid.*, p. 105).

successfully involved in the women's rights and antislavery movements, which likely had a deep influence on her.

Female role models were often at the heart of these women's incentives to work for their race. For instance, Terrell saw her mother as an example of good will, generosity, and cheerfulness.<sup>45</sup> But the figure of her courageous, dignified grandmother appears to have had the greatest influence on her.<sup>46</sup> Of all the stories her grandmother had told her about her life in bondage, the one in which she threatened her master to death when he was about to whip her, made the biggest impression on young Mary Terrell.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Drumgoold's female relatives highly prized their independence and did not relent before adversity. After being sold away in Georgia, her mother came back to Virginia to get her children after the war was over, defying her former master when he refused to free her offspring. A Bureau agent named Major Bailey helped her and her family reach Brooklyn, and at the end of her account, Drumgoold pays a vibrant tribute to her mother.<sup>48</sup> Taylor's mother and grandmothers were role models as well. Historian Catherine Clinton indicates that Taylor "was descended from a long line of proud females who passed on their stories to their daughters and instilled in them a sense of pride in heritage that was not dimmed by generations of bondage."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, women of African descent passed on the stories of resistance from mothers to daughters. Figures of uncompromising women seem to have deeply inspired their daughters and instilled a sense of racial pride in them. Slavery being an important component of these family stories it was a constant reminder of the injustice suffered by their people, even in the free upper-class families of the North. The memory of slavery was part of a larger racial sense of identity and it pushed these women to act against any sort of servitude.

In addition, African American women who enjoyed comfortable situations were willing to give back to their community in recognition of what they themselves had been given. For example, Mary Church Terrell was among the first black women to enter the Classical course at Oberlin College. Many years later, she wrote: "All during my college course I had dreamed of the day when I could promote the welfare of my race."<sup>50</sup> After leaving Ohio, she lived at her father's place for a year. Remaining idle and jobless was unbearable to her and teaching almost became an obsession: "After graduating from Oberlin, I grew more restless and dissatisfied with the life I was living in Memphis."<sup>51</sup> She felt that her educational achievements would lack meaning if she did not use her skills to "uplift" the race. What is more, Mary Terrell had carefully prepared her future career: "I decided that life would be pleasanter . . . if I left Memphis and engaged in the work I had prepared myself to do."<sup>52</sup> Race-centered work was at the heart of privileged Mary Terrell's concerns and she was not an exception. Most of the women under study were raised to pass on their knowledge to black people from more modest backgrounds.

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<sup>45</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Her grand-mother had been so affected by slavery that when Mollie (Mary) asked her to speak about it, she seldom could finish her story, being too emotional.

<sup>47</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> K. Drumgoold, "A Slave Girl's Story," p. 5-6, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Catherine Clinton, "Introduction," S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. xxi.

<sup>50</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Lastly, female educators were influenced by deep personal religious beliefs. Many read the Bible and identified themselves closely with the Israelites. The Exodus is a common theme in the African American religious ideology. For example, Kate Drumgoold compares the black race to the “children of Israel who, after many weary years in bondage, were led into that land of promise.”<sup>53</sup> Among all four women, Kate Drumgoold is the one who displays the strongest religious motivations. Even though she was not baptized until her teens, her life narrative literally teems with references to God. She felt entrusted with a divine mission to teach African Americans.<sup>54</sup> She uses a biblical terminology to describe her attachment to education, which she considers as almost sacred. As a Christian, she believes in freedom for all and in human equality before God. Drumgoold too analyzes America’s racial problem in religious terms, claiming that the only difference among Americans lies in the way they apply religious precepts onto their society. The way she depicts the North is informative of the way she viewed the South. Born in the South, Kate Drumgoold was deeply attached to Brooklyn, her adoptive city. In her eyes, it was:

a lovely city, where there are those that love and fear God, and who love the souls of the negro as well as those of the white, the red, the yellow or brown races of the earth, for we have ever found some of the people who do not forget us day or night in their prayers, that God will send a blessing to us as a race.<sup>55</sup>

North and South differed because in the North, the dominant white race, she thought, adopted more Christian views about black people. Only in the North could African Americans find this racial harmony fostered by the Christian religion. Her vision of Brooklyn is idealistic as she portrays this part of New York as prejudice-free.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, she was ready to leave Brooklyn – a place she considered as relatively safe – in order to uplift the entire race. Refusing political disempowerment or any form of bondage and viewing all blacks as bound together, she discarded regional or class distinctions: “Every time that I saw the newspaper, there was someone of our race in the far South getting killed for trying to teach and I made up my mind that I would die to see my people taught.”<sup>57</sup> God was the only authority that could either forbid or allow her to work for her race. Black ministers and preachers in both the North and the South promoted these ideas in their sermons. Kate Drumgoold was not the only one to display a strong faith: all four women were believers and religion proved to be one of the most potent driving forces behind their devotion toward education.

Many different political, ideological, financial and religious reasons motivated African American women to become teachers during the Civil War, Reconstruction and in the late nineteenth century. In the case of the four women under study, uplifting the race

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<sup>53</sup> K. Drumgoold, “A Slave Girl’s Story,” p. 75.

<sup>54</sup> Kate Drumgoold, clearly drawing a parallel with God’s flesh and blood, refers to the work of missionary workers in religious terms: “[Teaching] is their meat and their drink.” (*Ibid.*, p. 149)

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>56</sup> This was not the case: see for instance the accounts of various African American women in New York City such as Addie Brown (Farah Jasmine Griffin (ed.), *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*, New York, Ballantine, 1999), Maritcha Lyons (“Memories of Yesterdays, All of Which I Saw and Part of Which I Was, an Autobiography,” unpublished manuscript, ca. 1924, Harry Albro Williamson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library), and the letters by Pauline Williamson Lyons (Harry Albro Williamson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library).

<sup>57</sup> K. Drumgoold, “A Slave Girl’s Story,” p. 124.

seemed to be what constituted their foremost motivation. The concept of racial progress, or race uplift – linked to DuBois’ theory regarding “the negro problem” in the early twentieth century – became increasingly important during the post-Reconstruction era (1880s).<sup>58</sup> Through their involvement in associations, settlement houses, Church organizations, and clubs, members of the black middle-class – often called the “better class” – had a “duty” and “responsibility” towards the less fortunate of their brothers and sisters.<sup>59</sup> In fact, African Americans of the upper and middle-class had long been involved in such work.

### **Being an African American Female Teacher in the US North and South (1861-1900)**

These women’s experience as teachers was not exempt from difficulties. Their financial situation was often complex. In extreme situations, they did not even earn a salary. For instance, Susie King Taylor wrote that she had to live on military rations at that time as she “gave [her] services willingly for four years and three months without receiving a dollar.”<sup>60</sup> It was even more complicated if women had to take care of family members. Ella Forbes explains: “The insufficient pay was especially difficult for most of the African American teachers because they were often required, through circumstances, to provide for themselves and contribute to their families.”<sup>61</sup>

What is more, their experiences were very diverse because of both the time period in which they worked and the level of assistance they received. Northern and southern black women did not enjoy the same opportunities: the former received more aid than the latter. Ronald Butchart argues that “northern blacks were somewhat more likely to gain aid society sponsorship than southern black teachers.”<sup>62</sup> For instance, Charlotte Forten did receive payment for her work on Saint Helena Island through the Port Royal Relief Association of Philadelphia.<sup>63</sup> Northern blacks also received more substantial salaries than southern African American teachers. Furthermore, black women received comparatively less funding than white teachers who were sent south: they also often worked on their own. Forbes shows that “[m]ost of the African American teachers of freed people ended up working for white organizations, while some conducted private free or fee-based schools.”<sup>64</sup> Thus the situation was harsher for teachers who could not ensure a salary by

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<sup>58</sup> This concept was not new though: the notion of the duty to “advance” the race was commonly used by early African American writers such as Phillis Wheatley or Frederick Douglass, only with different terms.

<sup>59</sup> See for instance the work of Kevin Gaines on racial uplift ideology (*Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Chapel Hill; U of North Carolina P, 1996) and the work by Evelyn Higginbotham on the notion of “respectability” (*Righteous Discontent, op. cit.*).

<sup>60</sup> S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> E. Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War*, p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> R. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, p. 37.

<sup>63</sup> This was true for several other northern-born women. Similarly, the Massachusetts-born educator Rebecca Primus was helped by the New York Society and this afforded these women a decent living. Between 1876 and 1877, she tried to convince her family at home in Hartford, Massachusetts to raise funding for her schoolhouse in Royal Oak, Maryland. Unlike many southern black teachers, she benefited from substantial aid from her missionary society (F.J. Griffin (ed.), *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*).

<sup>64</sup> E. Forbes, *African American Women during the Civil War*, p. 119.

working for an association – usually a northern white one. This was the case for Suzie King Taylor, who, after the war was over, successively opened two fee-based schools but soon met with difficulties.<sup>65</sup> Discouraged, she then closed her school and decided to stop teaching.<sup>66</sup> In her case, financial problems put an end to her teaching career. The reason why she did not try to work for northern freedmen’s aid associations in order to secure a steadier income may be that these associations had a drastic selection process. Only young, single, childless women were offered positions. In 1868, Taylor was a twenty-year old widow and the mother of one child. What is more, she seems to have valued her independence above anything else. She nevertheless managed to make a living: during her later life, she worked as a domestic, a cook and much later, in 1886, she became involved in the Women’s Relief Corps, the association in charge of commemorating the memory of Civil War Union veterans.

Conversely, a few African American women did manage to live comfortably from teaching. For example, Mary Church Terrell earned a substantial income. In the late 1870s, she received a “munificent” \$40 per month when she started teaching at Wilberforce University.<sup>67</sup> She considered it a relatively satisfactory amount for her time and educational level. White educators however earned comparatively higher salaries than she did. In her autobiography, Terrell does not make any further reference to her pay as a teacher, but she must have been able to secure an increasingly comfortable income over the years. Her privileged situation makes her case unique as she taught at an institution of higher education – what is more in the State of Ohio, famous for its liberality towards black education, notably with Oberlin College – and later at a famous high school in Washington, DC. Even if a black woman teacher’s monthly salary in a primary or secondary school slowly increased over the years, the financial situation proved much more difficult for African American women teachers than for their white counterparts. Indeed, integrated school boards members were often white and voted discriminatory rules for black teachers’ payroll.

Working conditions could be difficult as well. While other women did not provide any comments on their conditions, on October 18, 1863, Forten describes having “commenced school on the Perry place,” where she had “a comparatively comfortable

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<sup>65</sup> She first opened a fee-based school at her home in Savannah, Georgia where she taught twenty children. She charged one dollar for each pupil and even conducted an evening school. She successfully taught for one year but soon met difficulties. In fact, new public schools opened throughout the South in the late 1860s and 1870s, thus emptying the classrooms of many teachers’ fee-based schools. Taylor eventually had to close her school after a free institution named the “Beach Institute” opened. All of her pupils having deserted her school, she “was obliged to give up teaching” there in September 1866 (p. 54). She opened a new school in Liberty County, Georgia and taught there for a year. Yet, Taylor had difficulty adjusting to her new life far from the city: “Country life did not agree with me, so I returned to the city”, she writes. Another woman, Mrs Susie Carrier, took charge of her school. Back in Savannah, Taylor realized that she would have to open a new school again as the free school had taken all her former pupils, p. 54- 55. She earned some money by conducting a night school but had to be assisted financially by her brother-in-law. She was able to teach until 1868, when a free night school also opened at the same Beach Institute and forced her to stop teaching. See also the introduction by Catherine Clinton, p. xxviii.

<sup>66</sup> S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 54-55.

<sup>67</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 60. She was paid more than other black female educators because she taught at College level. For instance, at Wilberforce University, she taught subjects such as mineralogy or French.

room with a fire in it, – much preferable to the church”<sup>68</sup> where she initially worked and which had no heating. Heating or glass windows were luxuries and missionary teachers in the South sometimes worked without books, pencils, or blackboard. Conditions improved over time as local communities helped the profession.

These four women’s teaching experiences were very diverse. Teaching demanded a high level of adaptability. While Terrell was teaching French and mineralogy at university level and had to catch up in some subjects in order to deliver satisfactory lectures, Forten taught children aged three and older whom she called her “babies,” and developed pedagogic strategies: “I have found it very interesting to give them a kind of object lesson with the picture cards,” she writes.<sup>69</sup> Yet, despite the diversity in their teaching situations, all four teachers rejoiced over their pupils’ high degree of interest in school. They delighted to see what progress their “scholars” made, whether they were reading and writing beginners or more advanced. Like many other teachers, Susie King Taylor taught both adults and children. Indeed, during the war, many classes included young pupils as well as a sizeable number of male and female adults because most slaves had not been able to learn how to read and write under slavery. They thus did not hesitate to attend any teacher’s class whenever they could. For instance, Taylor writes: “I taught a great many of the comrades in Company E. to read and write. Nearly all were anxious to learn. My husband taught some also when it was convenient for him [he was an officer]. I was very happy to know my efforts were successful in camp, and also felt grateful for the appreciation of my services.”<sup>70</sup> During the war, Taylor also taught schoolchildren: she had “about forty children to teach, beside a number of adults who came to me [at] nights, all of them so eager to learn to read, to read above anything else.”<sup>71</sup> Like most teachers, she testified that literacy was considered primordial by former slaves. Kate Drumgoold gives a comparable account of her teaching experience in the 1880s. As a teacher in West Virginia for several years, she rejoiced over the pupils’ enthusiasm: “Some would go without their food all day to study extra lessons”, she writes. For her, teaching was “a pleasure.”<sup>72</sup> When she visited her first school Forten shared this impression: “I noticed with pleasure how bright, how eager to learn many of them were.”<sup>73</sup> When she taught for Mrs. Towne for the first time, she was delighted: “The children are well-behaved and eager to learn. It will be happiness to teach here.”<sup>74</sup> Whether these teachers were sponsored by northern associations or the federal government or not, whether they taught in Union-controlled South Carolina, Washington, DC or Western Virginia, in the 1860s or the 1900s, most women in this study drew great satisfaction from teaching.

Despite their love for the job, all four women found teaching strenuous. Mary Terrell writes: “Nobody could truthfully claim that I had many idle moments when I taught at Wilberforce University. I certainly earned my salary.”<sup>75</sup> Kate Drumgoold noted in

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<sup>68</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 509.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>70</sup> S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> “It would be all of a joy to the whole world to have seen how well all of the girls, boys, young man and young ladies did in all of the schools where I have had the pleasure of teaching.” (p. 154)

<sup>73</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 391.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>75</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 62.

1886 that she had her “hands full of work.” She taught long hours, the classes could be very large, and teaching was demanding. Kate Drumgoold describes the difficulties she met as a teacher in Woodstock, Shenandoah County, Virginia. She was sent to a school “where the teachers had made the pupils almost hate to go to a school”. Teaching there was a challenge: “Sometimes it was not all flowers and sweetness, but in it all I can see the hand of the Blessed one.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Forten experienced ups and downs in South Carolina. On November 5, 1862, she had her first teaching experience on Saint Helena Island. Her class was very large and composed of pupils of very diverse ages. She wrote: “My first regular teaching experience . . . was *not* a pleasant one. Part of my scholars are . . . too young even for the alphabet, it seems to me.”<sup>77</sup> The demand for education in the south was so high that very often there were too many pupils per class. Forten complained about having “to exert my lungs far above their strength to make myself heard when more than 100 children were reciting at the same time in the same room.”<sup>78</sup>

As a result of such exertions, many teachers developed health problems and were often overworked. This was true in particular for teachers sent to the South at the time of the Civil War. For women newly accustomed to northern climates, hot weather, unsanitary places, and long hours in the South took their toll. Forten was not accustomed to what she called “the sickly season” and her health quickly deteriorated. In February 1863, after nine months in the South, she reported feeling “quite unwell yesterday and today. This morning the Townes . . . came in declaring that I need a change of air.”<sup>79</sup> On July 26: “My strength has failed rapidly of late. Have become so weak that I fear I should be an easy prey to the fever which prevails here, a little later in the season.” Forten finally “took [her] good doctor’s advice, therefore, and [went] North on a furlough – to stay until the unhealthiest season is over.”<sup>80</sup> She allowed herself to return home for a few months in late July 1863 and came back on October 10 of the same year. The southern-born Kate Drumgoold resisted the heat adequately but fell sick due to work overload as well. The Doctor concluded that the “nerves were all overworked, in fact had brought on other troubles which were all the dangerous nature.” With a heavy heart, she “came on home to Brooklyn,” but eventually “went back to [her] work and taught all that winter.”<sup>81</sup>

Not only did teachers have to cope with the climate or hard work in poor conditions, but those who travelled to a different region met with other difficulties. They had to confront a whole new set of customs, worldviews, and often distinct social and racial environments. This demanded important adjustments on their part. Open racism or hostility against black female teachers – whether they were born there or not – was manifest in the South during the war and Reconstruction. Thus, they were not only discriminated against because of their occupation or regional identity, but also because of their skin color and gender. Even if black women were used to racial discrimination, racism manifested itself more openly and severely in the South and they had little recourse against it. Women who taught outside the South were somewhat less exposed to such manifestations of hostility, although in the 1860s, they could also be subjected to

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<sup>76</sup> K. Drumgoold, “A Slave Girl’s Story,” p. 142.

<sup>77</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 394.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>81</sup> K. Drumgoold, “A Slave Girl’s Story,” p. 142-143.

discriminatory laws in both in the South and in the North – in Philadelphia, for instance -, as well as in Washington, DC. For example, Mary Church Terrell, who had already experienced racial segregation when she travelled with her father in a car as a little girl in Memphis, Tennessee, was exposed to segregationist laws in the capital city and deplored the humiliation of having to ride in segregated cars in Washington, DC in the 1870s.<sup>82</sup>

Being in the South definitely entailed risks: until April 1865, the region was not entirely under the control of the Union army. Between 1865 and 1877, the presence of Federal troops there offered relative safety to teachers since it somewhat deterred southern white supremacists from attacking them<sup>83</sup>. Yet, most black women who came to teach in that region in the 1860s as missionaries were faced with the local population's hostility in addition to legal racial segregation. When federal troops left in 1877 and white supremacy was firmly re-established, racial tensions increased and rendered the job even more difficult<sup>84</sup>. In the 1860s or the 1890s, churches and schools were burnt down and teachers were regularly threatened.

Furthermore, not only were black missionary teachers confronted with racism in their public lives, but they also suffered from it on a personal level. They were very often denied the opportunity to find accommodation on account of their skin color and sometimes even fell victims to violence.<sup>85</sup> Several times Suzie King Taylor refers to the hostility of whites she called "secesh" or "rebels." In 1863, she explains that whites were "bitterly against our people and had no mercy or sympathy for us" when she and her group asked for food<sup>86</sup>. Another time in Charleston, in 1865, "these white men and women could not tolerate our black Union soldiers, for many had formerly been their slaves."<sup>87</sup> All women were very much aware that economic and social questions were predominant in

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<sup>82</sup> Washington, DC has a special status in US history and is considered as "in-between" North and South – neither part of one, nor of the other.

<sup>83</sup> Violent attacks and threats nevertheless occurred frequently in the South between 1865 and 1877, in particular in isolated areas. See the testimonies of Edmonia Highgate, a teacher from Massachusetts who was sent by the AMA to Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, in the fall of 1866 and who had her school burned down and received death threats: "There has been much opposition to the school. Twice I have been shot at in my room. My night scholars have been shot but none killed. The rebels have threatened to burn down the school and house in which I board." D. Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 299.

<sup>84</sup> Not only were black people discriminated against in the 1880s and 1890s, but from 1890 to 1906, they were also deprived of their newly-acquired civil and political rights – i.e. the right to vote – with the passage of the poll tax, literacy tests and the grandfather clause in several southern States. Murderous intimidation methods such as lynching were also used against African Americans. Men and women teachers witnessed this form of violence around them. For instance, journalist and activist Ida B. Wells – who taught for several years in Memphis, TN – became famous when she launched her "crusade" against lynching in 1893 after the infamous attack on her friend Thomas Moss. Ida B. Wells had worked as a teacher in Memphis, Tennessee until 1888 and was familiar with the threats that educators – black in particular – could suffer from.

<sup>85</sup> For instance, Rebecca Primus, a black woman from Hartford, Connecticut, alludes to her friend Mrs. Dickson being molested by white children on the street in Maryland in the mid-1860s in a letter to her friend Addie Brown. Mrs. Dickson reported having her shoulder dislocated in 1864. See F.J. Griffin (ed.), *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*, p. 120.

<sup>86</sup> S. Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.



the debate. Taylor, King, and Forten all understood that after the war, southern whites expressed their anger over the loss of their economic and social privileges<sup>88</sup>.

Despite these obstacles, these black women teachers adjusted to their new social environment and fostered education as best they could. In spite of whites' resentment and hostility, many educators who taught in the South were warmly greeted by freedmen and women, and adjusted to the local communities with relative ease. For example, neither Charlotte Forten nor Susie King Taylor nor Kate Drumgoold suffered from direct attacks on their schools. Forten reported on October 27, 1862 about local people being "kind and polite."<sup>89</sup> Two days later, she thought that she would "get on amicably with them."<sup>90</sup> Being on an island where the Union army was present offered Taylor and Forten relative safety. Forten's situation is exceptional insofar as she lived on Saint Helena Island, which had been deserted by its exclusively-white population and was now inhabited by former slaves, army personnel and northern white missionary workers. As a result, many teachers were welcomed by locals. Still, all over the South, freed people were always very supportive of the teachers and warmly welcomed black or white educators whom they considered as benevolent and friendly. Moreover, pupils' parents were very often willing to contribute to heating expenses and sometimes offered to build the schoolhouse.

Southern women such as Drumgoold and Taylor greatly defied established social, racial and gender norms. "Even more than the northern black teachers, southern black teachers crossed symbolic, social, and political borders as well," Ronald Butchart argues<sup>91</sup>. The social achievement connected to the profession was sufficient to prove the work many female blacks had accomplished even before emancipation. Additionally, Butchart emphasizes in his book that "hundreds of black women who took up teaching violated traditional southern gender boundaries, like their white southern counterparts, but with the added transgression of violating expected racial norms."<sup>92</sup> By going against both gender and racial expectations, black southern educators of humble social origins who taught in the 1860s and 1870s, whether in the North or in the South, such as Susie Taylor or Kate Drumgoold, achieved more than their northern counterparts who had had easier access to primary and secondary education. Indeed, teaching was increasingly considered as a decent occupation for women in the North, whereas because of "the southern lady" ideology, Southerners were more reluctant to sanction the employment of female educators. The North – although historically attached to Victorianism and the idea of "separate spheres" – had started to tolerate female work in the wake of the industrial revolution. After the war, Northerners were more attached to the Protestant work ethic and hence enabled women, especially when they were single or widowed, to occupy teaching positions.<sup>93</sup> On the contrary, Southerners had a very different vision of what

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<sup>88</sup> During Reconstruction and afterwards, the whole economic system of the South rested on the exploitation of field-hands (former slaves), which helped enforce and justify the same social and racial hierarchy as under slavery. After the war, southern whites for instance worried about blacks being able to buy farms and sell crops. They also resented African Americans not yielding way on the streets or showing signs of deference to them. This is often evoked in white women's diaries or letters of this period.

<sup>89</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 386.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>91</sup> R. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, p. 49.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50-51.

<sup>93</sup> During the nineteenth century, men and women were thought to belong in separate, distinct spheres: women in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere of business and work. Historian Barbara Welter explained

constituted proper womanhood. In the antebellum South, the elite white woman – or Southern “belle” – was considered as a fragile and delicate being, “modest, gentle, kind, quiet, industrious, and naturally innocent and pious in thought” who was to be defended by chivalric men against any external aggression.<sup>94</sup> According to the theory of “separate spheres”, southern women were to remain in the domestic realm; yet, the war changed these social representations. Jane Censer Turner explains that the Civil War “promulgated images of heroines and heroic women who spied, nursed wounded soldiers, and valiantly protected hearth and home” and that “womanly independence and achievement” were paramount after the conflict.<sup>95</sup> As a result, “[t]he ideal of womanhood, along with traditional values of self-sacrifice and duty, have come to include a more active, outspoken, and courageous aspect.”<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, “Some southern white women in the 1870s and 1880s forged identities that challenged the notion of the ‘southern belle,’ the version of femininity that stressed power through ‘fascination’ and romantic appeal.”<sup>97</sup> In fact, “contemporary writings in the late 19th century suggest that the belle was merely one persona of the new woman emerging at a time when elite southern whites were rethinking notions of womanhood and proper female roles.”<sup>98</sup> According to Turner, “elite southern women would become increasingly polarized between the revised image of the “Southern belle” and that of the emancipated new woman. To be sure, the belle emerging in the 1880s was far less demure than her grandmother had been in antebellum days.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, it seems that not all women could exist beyond the domestic sphere. In her study of “New Women” in the New South, Wheeler explains that “in reality the elite Southern white woman . . . was taught not to question her ‘divinely appointed role’ or to challenge the wisdom and authority of Southern males.”<sup>100</sup>

On the contrary, before and after the war, black women of all social backgrounds were excluded from the cult of domesticity or of “True womanhood.”<sup>101</sup> Class indeed did not influence the way most white Americans viewed African Americans and in the South, and upper-class black women lost much of their status because their racial identity often

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that four cardinal virtues were central to “true womanhood”: “piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness.” “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 / 2 (1966), p. 151-174.

<sup>94</sup> Jane Censer Turner, *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood: 1865-1895*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP, 2003, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Turner adds that “the genie of engaged womanhood could never again be wholly bottled up,” “this female self-reliance could be channeled into different forms of usefulness – benevolent and politically and socially conservative activities, as well as reforming ones.” (*Ibid.*, p. 12)

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. White southerners used the image of the southern belle along with the Lost Cause ideology and white supremacy to weave a definition of southern womanhood in need of protection, from black men in particular. See for instance the propensity of depicting black men as rapists in the press and of lynching them on such accusations.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>100</sup> Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1993, p. 6-7. A specialist of southern women, Marjorie Wheeler also explains that “southern women were socially important primarily through their roles as preserver[s] of religion and morality, inspiration[s] to [their] husband[s], and the conduit[s] of Southern values to future generations of Southern statesmen.” (p. 6-7).

<sup>101</sup> Eric Foner explains that under slavery, “[t]he 19<sup>th</sup> century’s ‘cult of domesticity’, which defined the home as a woman’s proper sphere, did not apply to slave women, who regularly worked in the fields.” *Give me Liberty!*, p. 417. See the fascinating work of Shirley Carlson on that question in the post-war period: “Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era,” *The Journal of Negro History* 77 / 2 (1992), p. 61-73.

outweighed their social status. Consequently, black women from the South or from the North had to construct (and often defend) their own image in contrast with white women. Black bourgeois women living in the North, such as Forten and Terrell, had much in common with northern white women, yet they were made to feel different. Being rejected at times by both northern and southern whites, they engaged in racial work precisely because they had a sense of belonging to the black race.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, as explained above, notions of “proper womanhood” varied over time, the “New woman” figure grew more accepted, which gave some more latitude to American women in the 1880s. Because of such changes, black women such as Terrell, who worked during the 1880s, met with less resistance in their work than those who had taught in the mid-1860s. What is more, black women had a long tradition of work and activism.

Working in a different region demanded greater adjustment on the part of teachers because North and South were so culturally different. Those women who travelled south of the Mason-Dixon Line to become teachers brought with them the beliefs and customs which they had either inherited from their childhood in their native North, or developed by living there for several years. As a result, it is necessary to dwell on the extent of the cultural shock and the social gap they experienced, and to examine how social status affects the experience of regional transplantation.

### **On the importance of social class and region**

Each teacher came with a set of beliefs and values of her own that was shaped by both her class and regional affiliations. For instance, the northerner Charlotte Forten and the southern-born Mary Church Terrell belonged to the black upper-class while Kate Drumgoold and Susie King Taylor came from more modest social backgrounds. In addition, women’s regional identity influenced the way these educators adapted to their teaching environment. For example, Forten’s teaching experience in the South was very different from that of Taylor, who originated from that region.

Although very few African American women could travel before the war, a growing number of women became geographically mobile after the 1860s and acquired a dual regional identity that they used in order to adjust to their new circumstances. For instance, as Terrell emphasizes in her account, she was a Southerner who had been raised in the North at Oberlin College in Ohio, where “she had imbibed the Yankee’s respect for work.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Kate Drumgoold had been brought up in the South but had also adopted northern ways after she moved north at the age of seven, and she considered Brooklyn as “home”. She had absorbed northern habits and ways of thinking. Such women aimed at transmitting the ethics of hard work and moral purity to their scholars in order for them to become better citizens. For these migrant women with experiences in diverse geographical areas, a dual regional identity became an asset. Nevertheless, women such as

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<sup>102</sup> See the study by Willard B. Gatewood on the black elite: *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1990.

<sup>103</sup> M. Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, p. 59-60.

Forten who had never left their region before had to make more efforts to adjust to their new lives.

Even though all four women travelled quite extensively in order to teach black Americans – which was quite exceptional and daring for women at the time – they did not meet realities that were dramatically different from their own. Suzie King Taylor considered other African Americans without any class or regional pre-conceptions for she was herself a southern woman of modest means who had had the opportunity to learn how to read and write. She seemed to think that she and other black people on Saint Simons Island shared the same cultural and geographical identity. Kate Drumgoold taught poor southern people in Virginia and West Virginia and she shared a common culture and the same regional origin with them, even though she had lived in Brooklyn from an early age and had enjoyed the greater racial tolerance of the North. The students of Mary Church Terrell came from well-to-do backgrounds like her. Although her father never allowed her to teach in the South, he reluctantly agreed to her choosing a teaching career in the North. Working mainly in the North and in Washington, DC throughout her career, she eventually submitted to the regional, social, and gender norms defined by her father.<sup>104</sup> In fact, none of these four women felt the cultural gap as widely as Charlotte Forten: she was the one who crossed the most defined regional and class boundaries. In her diary, she comments extensively on how different life in South Carolina was compared to Massachusetts. Not only was she taken aback by material difficulties, she also expresses surprise when facing different social and cultural habits. For instance, she repeatedly uses the words “unreal” or “dream” in order to describe her impressions. To her, the land of “Rebeldom” looked like “a strange wild dream.”<sup>105</sup> Forten’s extensive use of the adjective “strange” throughout her diary shows how wide the gap between North and South appeared to her.<sup>106</sup>

For women such as Charlotte Forten who had not previously lived outside their native region, the gap could be wide indeed. Like her, several well-off women left well-

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<sup>104</sup> Being a wealthy black man from the South, Mr. Terrell would have preferred his daughter to remain at home, like a “southern lady”. Mary Church Terrell explains: “I could not engage actively in any kind of work outside of the home, because my father did not approve of my doing so.” When she insisted upon working, her father insisted that she work in the northern section of the country. “He would not consent to my teaching in the public schools in Memphis because I would be taking the bread and butter from the mouth of some girls who needed it. . . . Since he was able and willing to support me, he declared, he did not understand why I wanted to teach or do any kind of work.” By forbidding his daughter to teach in the South, he certainly hoped for her to avoid working in difficult conditions. He was also very much aware that southern women’s perspectives were more restricted than in the North. This is why he insisted on his ability to support her. In addition, he seemed to imply that being able to stay at home was not only a mark of social success but also, most importantly, a guarantee of respectability for women. See pages 61-63. Mr. Terrell’s insistence on class, propriety and on the social opportunities money could offer shows how central social status was for upper-class blacks of the South. Finally, it is interesting to note the strict opposition Terrell’s father made between life in Northern and Southern states.

<sup>105</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 390.

<sup>106</sup> Forten uses the adjective “strange” extensively to describe the South or local people. Living in the South was obviously a destabilizing experience and the cultural gap is evident in her journal. On 5 November, she pens: “Everything is very strange, very strange.” (p.395) Indeed, despite repeatedly claiming her love of southern music, she often describes it as “strange”. For example: “[This music] is a very strange wild thing.” (p. 410) She even acknowledged being once unable to comprehend the songs: “They are very wild and strange. It was impossible for me to understand many of the words although I asked them to repeat them for me.” Forten had difficulty understanding the locals. In fact, most former slaves on St Helena Island spoke Gullah (p. 402).

paying teaching positions when they applied for positions at the American Missionary Association (AMA) or Relief associations during the American Civil War and expressed their strong patriotism by working as teachers thousands of miles away from home at a time of military uncertainty and danger. Numerous black and white women had shown patriotism during the war, either by teaching freedmen, by sewing and sending clothes to soldiers through missionary associations, or by working as nurses or cooks in the army. Some of them even acted as spies on either side.<sup>107</sup> But for black upper-class women such as Charlotte Forten and Mary Church Terrell, who were accustomed to comfortable dwellings, frugal surroundings sometimes required much adjustment. For instance, upon first entering the home in which she was to be housed on Saint Helena Island on October 29, 1862, Forten describes the “dilapidated condition [of the house] . . . and the neglected look of the yard and garden.”

In her diary, Forten also rejoices over the fact that freedmen and freedwomen could be legally married, showing that she shared white Christian upper and middle-class values. Marriage was according to her “one of the many privileges that freedom has bestowed upon them – that is quite pleasant to see them.”<sup>108</sup> Of course, she understands that former slaves were allowed to marry legally for the first time since marriage had not been allowed for blacks during slavery. Still, she adds: “I am truly glad that the poor creatures are trying to live right and virtuous lives.”<sup>109</sup> Aside from the fact that the pronoun “they” enhances the distance between her and the freedmen, her choice of words makes it sound as if they had previously shunned the only accepted form of union between a man and a woman.

Additionally, Forten expressed preconceived ideas about the South and she sometimes passed judgment on the locals. On January 31, 1863, on a boat trip to Beaufort, when the boatmen did not sing, she was “very much disappoint[ed]” because she had assumed that all boatmen were singers. Informed of the contrary, she comments in her diary: “*that* is most surprising. I thought everybody sang down here. Certainly every boat crew *ought*.”<sup>110</sup> Her description of the island’s inhabitants reveals her class prejudices, as when sent to a new plantation, she calls the children “crude little specimens.”<sup>111</sup> She also describes a young boy named Prince in a way that enhances how distant from her cultural and social world he was: “It was amusing to see his gymnastic performances. They were quite in the Ethiopian Methodists’ style. . . . He is the most comical creature I ever saw.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> See the writings of Rose O’Neal Greenhow, who became famous for working as a Confederate spy, and the biography of Elizabeth Van Lew, who was a Southern spy supporting the Union, assisted by Mary Bowser, an African American woman. Rose O’Neal Greenhow, *Rose O’Neal Greenhow Papers: An On-line Archival Collection*, Special Collections Library, Duke University, <<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/greenhow/roseindex.html>> [last accessed 14 February 2014], copyright 1996 by the Special Collections Library, Duke University; Rose O’Neal Greenhow, *My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule At Washington*, electronic edition, <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/greenhow/greenhow.html>> [last accessed 14 February 2014], copyright 2004 by the University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*, New York, Oxford UP, 2003.

<sup>108</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 406.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402, 409.

Moreover, when attending a former slave's wedding, her upper-class posture is evident in her ironic comment on the brides' dresses and attitudes:

Six couples were married today. Some of the dresses were unique. I'm sure one must have worn a cast-off dress of her mistress's. It looked like a white silk covered with lace. The lace sleeves and other trimmings were in rather a decayed state, the white cotton gloves were well ventilated. But the bride looked nonetheless happy for that. . . . It was amusing to see some of the headdresses. One, of tattered flowers and ribbons, was very ridiculous.<sup>113</sup>

At another wedding, she describes "the bridal costumes" as "very unique and comical" and comments: "But the principal actors are fortunately quite unconscious of it, and look so proud and happy while enjoying this."<sup>114</sup> There is a blatant closeness between her thinking and that of northern upper- and middle-class women, whether white or black.<sup>115</sup> Yet, as historian Wilma King explains, "[i]t is obvious that distinctions existed between the freeborn women and the newly freed women based on background education and class."<sup>116</sup> Most importantly, "the teacher's personal accounts were not intended for 'public consumption' and correspond to 'personal opinions enveloped in private epistles', written almost instantly on paper."<sup>117</sup>

Despite her comments, Charlotte Forten felt sincere sympathy for the local people and did everything in her power to help them. She overcame the existing cultural gap thanks to her naturally empathetic character. As King argues, "[i]f one ignores infelicitous remarks, Forten appeared delighted to see women and men enjoying the privileges freedom offered, including legal marriages."<sup>118</sup> She sewed for families and, with other teachers, she "visited the sick, mourned the dead, and shared the joys of dreams fulfilled."<sup>119</sup> Indeed, when a baby died, Forten deeply sympathized with the family and sincerely shared their pain: "Its death is a great grief to its mother and grandparents, and a sorrow to us all."<sup>120</sup> She invested a lot of time and energy in helping the freedmen. After sewing a "red flannel jacket for poor Harriet who [was] far from well," Forten notes: "I wish I could do ten times as much for these people."<sup>121</sup>

Since she was present on the island at the time the Emancipation Proclamation was read, she lived this momentous time with the freedmen and writes several times about rejoicing over emancipation with the newly emancipated people. For instance, during a Church service, she notes: "It was a sight that I shall not soon forget – that crowd of eager, happy black faces from which the shadow of slavery had forever passed. 'Forever free! Forever free!' Those magical words were all the time singing themselves in my soul, and never before have I felt so truly grateful to God."<sup>122</sup> She also expressed her dedication to the

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>115</sup> See the excellent analysis by Wilma King in *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women during the Slave Era*, Columbia, U of Missouri P, 2006.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> C. Forten, *Journals*, p. 416.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

freemen: “My heart goes out to you. I shall be glad to do all that I can to help you.”<sup>123</sup> Forten was very active with the black community on the island. Displaying a genuine interest for African Americans recently out of bondage, she writes: “The more one knows of them the more interested one becomes in them.”<sup>124</sup> Thus, like Kate Drumgoold, Mary Church Terrell and Suzie King Taylor, Charlotte Forten seemed to consider that race was more important than class and region.

It thus seems that African American women teachers’ regional and social origins had an impact on their teaching experiences and on their view of the South and of southern African Americans. Their regional and class identity also influenced the way they perceived their own lives in the other region. Yet, despite the cultural shock and the social gap they experienced, all of them invested all their time and energy in the promotion of education. Women who had lived in both regions tended to adapt to their new circumstances more easily than women such as Forten who had never lived outside of their native regions. A dual regional identity thus constituted an advantage as few ordinary people – whether black or white – travelled outside their county or State at that time.

## Conclusion

Despite exacting teaching experiences and daunting situations, these four African American women teachers showed unabated motivation to promote education for their people. At different periods in American history, they provided the larger African American community with access to education in order to guarantee greater freedom and independence for all, as well as a responsible exercise of citizenship and political power. Their accounts testify to the fact that they were deeply aware that during the war and immediately after emancipation, teaching their race represented the key to genuine freedom and upward social mobility.

While the country was experiencing major legal, political, and social changes, while profound legislative and constitutional transformations were being made – with the passage of the three Reconstruction Amendments from 1865 and 1870 and of Civil Rights legislation –, while the South was going through major economic changes after emancipation, some of these women did not hesitate to travel far from home. During the 1880s and 1890s, after Jim Crow legislation had been passed in the South and race relations entered what Rayford Logan has called the “nadir,” several of these women also promoted education in order not only to offer opportunities to members of their community, but also to fight segregation and political disenfranchisement.

Whether they belonged to the northern black bourgeoisie or were newly emancipated slaves, whether they had just escaped from bondage, like Taylor, or had grown up in families who had been free for four generations, like Forten, whether they had grown up in the North or in the South, like Taylor, or had lived in both regions, like Terrell

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

and Drumgoold, their driving forces were similar. Their motivations were rooted in their racial consciousness, in their family history, in feminine role models as well as in historical circumstances and religion. As educators, they encountered more difficulties than white female teachers because they often confronted racism and hostility. Yet northern and southern black women did not experience their lives as teachers in the same way. This study shows that these four African American women's social backgrounds and regional affiliations affected the way they reflected on their teaching experience and time spent within the black community. We may say that women who had a dual regional identity, such as Kate Drumgoold, adjusted to their lives as teachers in a different region more easily or rapidly.

These four testimonies, in addition to offering an insight into women's involvement as teachers, help us explore a facet of black womanhood from 1861 to the early twentieth century that is not often studied through life narratives – a period when conceptions about womanhood were changing, from the “Cult of true womanhood” and the “theory of the separate spheres” to the emergence of the “New woman.” This approach helps to examine how race, region, gender, and class interplayed in these women's lives. Here, class interestingly appears as somewhat less important than region or race.

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