

## **Racist Feminism(s): White Southern Women's Post-Civil War Commemoration and Emancipation Culture**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines White elite Southern women's involvement in Civil War commemoration culture that glorified the Old South and constituted essentialist racial hierarchies for the New South. Commemoration efforts offered pathways to emancipation and, therefore, cannot only be read as symptomatic of a cultural schizophrenia about the South—torn between the trauma of slavery and a mythologizing of “old” Southern life—nor merely as part of White supremacist cultural politics, but need to be understood as part of a re-negotiation of New Southern femininity with a racist-feminist agenda. White Southern women contributed to the creation of the iconic Southern lady of a feminized South but not from a conservative impulse that aimed at regaining a postwar status quo but from an urge to preserve newly won freedoms and to resettle boundaries of gender and race relations.

**KEYWORDS:** women's life-writing; New Southern femininity; postbellum South; race discourse; Civil War commemoration culture; racist-feminist agenda

### **Introduction**

The American Civil War gave birth to White<sup>1</sup> Southern women's emancipation, a new reality most meant to preserve. In the postbellum period, these women were trying to have it both ways—on the one hand, they longed to return to the glory days of the Old South when life was better for their (White) selves, but on the other hand, they were finding it beneficial to have more rights and opportunities, including political clout and professional careers. While the Lost Cause was nominally celebrated to memorialize the lives of dear ones, these women even more so felt the need to connect their moment of self-assertion and engagement in public affairs to the national momentum and pride in the rebirth of the American nation that the Civil War had ushered in. The legitimacy of their new public roles indeed emanated from their self-glorified participation in the Civil War.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses upper-case “Black” and “White” to denote both as historically and culturally constructed racial designations.

Eminent scholars of Civil War culture have maintained that White Southern women nostalgically hailed the Southern past from a wish to return to antebellum race, class, and gender structures that would guarantee their former comfortable life-style.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, White women's postwar participation in Lost Cause myth-making and White supremacist rhetoric has been judged as inherently antifeminist. However, my study of White women's Civil War and postwar diaries indicates that, on the contrary, glorifying the South's character and role in the war became a means of asserting newly won female agency and the right to participate in public life. In addition, as I shall illustrate, the (re-)configuration of race and gender relations must be read against and as essential part of a transmogrified Southern postbellum femininity.<sup>3</sup>

In the following pages, I will sketch White Southern women's involvement in Civil War commemoration culture, their reliance on private war records to write themselves into the war narrative, and their narrative strategies of establishing emancipated selves against an imagined inferior racial other. A crucial and disturbing element of these women's emancipatory commemorative strategies turns out to be the narrative construction of racial hierarchies. They claim racial expertise based on their past role as enslavers and help to envision and eventually to realize a segregated country founded on White supremacist assumptions. At the end of the day, White elite women successfully macerated patriarchal norms while cementing essentialist racial paradigms.

To illustrate my point, I shall look at three Southern women Civil War diarists and their postwar engagement in Confederate and national memory culture. The choice of diarists was determined by their antebellum planter elite status and their engagement with Southern memory culture, be it via commemoration associations or journalistic endeavors in the postwar South. The sample includes Eliza Frances "Fanny" Andrews (1840–1931), Sarah Ida

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rable, *Civil Wars*; Faust, *Mothers of Invention*; Fox-Genovese, *Inside the Plantation Household*; Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*.

<sup>3</sup> I align myself here with Tara McPherson's definition of femininity as a "set of ideas about appropriate womanly behavior and feelings that are generally based on cultural assumptions about female nature" and as "social and discursive construction that nonetheless has real material effects" (21).

Fowler Morgan (1842–1909), and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas (1843–1907). They all came from slaveholding families in Georgia (Andrews and Thomas) and Louisiana (Morgan) and lost close family members to the war. In the aftermath of the war, all of them pursued independent lives as either journalists, scientists, or suffragists.

### **Postbellum Memory Culture as Pathway to Emancipation**

In 1908, Eliza Frances Andrews published parts of her war diaries as the *War Time Journal of a Georgia Girl*. The added prologue opens with a disclaimer on the immature nature of the impressions recorded at the time. She writes that

[t]o edit oneself after the lapse of nearly half a century is like taking an appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober. The changes of thought and feeling between the middle of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century are so great that the impulsive young person who penned the following record and the white-haired woman who edits it, are no more the same than were Philip drunk with the wine of youth and passion and Philip sobered by the lessons of age and experience. (2)

Andrews points out that in the lapse of over forty years between the writing and the publication of her Civil War diary a profound change had occurred in the way she perceived the world. She hardly seems to recognize herself and half-jokingly and half-apologetically describes her former self as “Philip drunk,” implying a state of intoxication, of passion and impulsive youthfulness. Some passages later, she even calls her young self “a full-blown idiot,” and believes she was “sobered” only by age and experience. What she refers to is her enthusiasm for the Southern Confederacy as a “rebel girl” during the Civil War. Most of Andrews’s introduction is devoted to highlighting the differences between the society of what she calls the “Old South” of her youth and of the “New South” of her older days. She endeavors to find an explanation for the change via natural, social, and economic evolution, using Charles Darwin’s and Karl Marx’s theories as a means of defining the Southern past as a “necessary evil” to make progress possible (5). Through the use of accompanying paratexts in the form of footnotes, a prologue, and a conclusion, Andrews tries to set herself off as author-editor from the experiencing “I,” in order to exhibit a matured personality, and, even

more so, to claim authenticity for the text. The journal is advertised as an undiluted witness account of a young girl as yet unbiased by political hindsight.

The assumed genuine time-witness character of women's personal war chronicles is one of the major reasons that Southern women's memoirs, recollections, and diary accounts came to be highly valued by late nineteenth-century memory culture, and later by historiography. Southern women in particular were seen as reliable if not impartial witnesses because they were part of a home front in the midst of battle lines and occupied territory. Prefaces and introductory notes to published journals abound in claims by the women authors that families, acquaintances, but also publishers (North and South) begged them to offer their account to the world. Kate Cumming, for example, opens her diary publication of 1866 with the apology that others urged her to publish and that, accordingly, she "has endeavored to give a true and impartial record of what came under her own *observation*" (5, emphasis added).

A large number of White, mostly well-educated and often well-to-do Southern women did not wait to be called up as witnesses but made sure they would be heard by engaging in memorial and reform organizations that sprang up all over the South in the 1880s. These women had grudgingly admitted defeat and, like Andrews with her social Darwinist interpretation, came up with all sorts of explanations that absolved the South of guilt or blame, such as divine interference or the natural progress of civilization. Part of the process was to frame the South as a lost idyll in an increasingly bleak industrial age.

Andrews relies on political and scientific texts in her argument that the "Old South" "perished not because it was evil or vicious in itself, but because [...] it has served its turn and must now lie in the grave of the dead past" (11). In short, chattel slavery had become obsolete and was replaced by a modern industrial system, adhering perfectly to the laws of evolution. She clearly sets out her agenda of "teach[ing] the children of the South to honor and revere the civilization of their fathers," a civilization, however, that they should mourn but "would not recall" (11).

One of the most prominent memorial societies in late nineteenth-century America was the institution of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). In her insightful study of *Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861–1937*, Sarah E. Gardner delineates the strong impact of the UDC on the memorialization of the Civil War. She explains how the body emerged out of women's auxiliary groups connected to the United Confederate Veterans Association in 1894, and developed into the "largest organization devoted to the preservation and mobilization of Southern memories of the Civil War" (159).

The great popularity of the UDC amongst White Southern women ensured its influence on the publication market for war memoirs and history books. As the United Confederate Veterans before them, they recommended or condemned works on the Civil War by composing explicit reading lists for their members. Publishers were acutely aware of this considerable power on the history book market. At the turn of the century the UDC successfully blocked certain publications and wielded a strong influence on works used in schools and colleges (Gardner 115–40, 159–61).

Two of the diarists studied in this article became leading members of the United Daughters and related institutions. Andrews headed the chapter in Rome, Georgia, as its president for a number of years and, from the mid-1880s onwards, Ella Gertrude Thomas participated in the Ladies' Memorial Association of Augusta, later turned into a UDC chapter, and served as its recording secretary and national treasurer.<sup>4</sup>

Record keeping had prepared these women for participation in memory culture. As diary keepers, they largely saw themselves as part of a transatlantic educated elite. Therefore, they frequently employed intertextual references to comment on events, to deliberate on issues such as slavery (although infrequently) and (more often) patriarchy, to express emotional strain, and to explore questions of regional and personal character. During the American Civil War, works by British and American authors such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Lord Byron, Fanny Fern, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Felicia Dorothea Hemans, Lord Tennyson, and Charlotte Mary Yonge did not only provide a temporary respite for a

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<sup>4</sup> See Jones, *Heroines of Dixie*, 356–57, 376 and Painter 17.

number of White Southern women from the horrors of war but informed their very perception of the world around them. Returning to their war records years later, some diarists questioned earlier attitudes and assumptions about the causes and events of the war but many continued to rely on literary precedent to support their newly formed opinions.

Eliza Frances Andrews continues in this conversational tradition when she starts her publishing, with a disclaimer referring to the “appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober,” a familiar image since Ralph Waldo Emerson famously drew on it in his discussion of the nature of man. Emerson uses the story of the poor woman appealing to King Philip of Macedon to support his argument that there are not two classes of men (good and bad, conservative and liberal, etc.) but only “man in two moods.” What Emerson is saying is that distinctions of behavior or character are not innate and that man has the God-given ability to scrutinize his conduct and to revise it accordingly. Andrews adopts Emerson’s idea by claiming that although she may have erred in her youth, she has now come to her senses and has altered her attitudes. Yet this concession that some of her former attitudes were “flawed” does not mean that her opinion of slavery as being beneficial to the slave had changed.<sup>5</sup>

In the five decades after the US Civil War, Southerners and Northerners contested the question of what the South had become. As Prince points out, the identity of the South was negotiated in “cultural productions ranging from speeches to travel guides to novels to minstrel shows,” through which “Northerners and Southerners reimagined Dixie” (3). The capacity to define the South guaranteed several social, economic, and political benefits and especially White well-to-do Southerners were keen on using those advantages to establish White Democratic rule in the South. Part of this process of reconstituting old Souths in the construction of a New South was the aggrandizement of the Southern lady. As Tara McPherson puts it so nicely, she became the “linchpin of nineteenth-century revisionist versions of the Old South, in which the Lost Cause ideology of southern nationalism conveniently fused the figure of the southern lady onto a celebration of the rebirth of a

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<sup>5</sup> See Emerson, “New England Reformers.”

'nation' defeated" and configured "the southern woman as discursive symbol for the region" (19). In the postwar era, the tenor and the approach to the Southern question assumed a new quality, and former diarists participated in the process by continuing to fashion personal and sectional as well as national selves as part of a grander literary narrative.

Towards the end of the war, Andrews boldly claims that "[m]arriage is incompatible with the career I have marked out for myself, but I want to have all the fun I can before I am too old" (96). This quotation illustrates that already during the war, when the overthrow of the Southern system with its patriarchal gender hierarchies was not yet an established fact, Andrews is mapping out for herself a "career" as a single woman.

Andrews kept true to her plan and never married. The career she had envisioned for herself was one as a writer and a botanist. Her engagement with the UDC possibly grew out of sentiments similar to those expressed in her anti-marriage statement. In any event, active engagement in the UDC guaranteed her a legitimized (institutionally chaperoned) public voice. Originally growing out of the United Confederate Veterans Association, the UDC had the approval of the male Southern elite but was largely independent from it. Not least, the memorial society secured a sympathetic audience to the women publishing and lecturing under its auspices.

Sarah Morgan also set out to try her luck as an independent Southern woman journalist but is not known to have joined the UDC. Morgan was so much bound up in Southern tradition and aristocratic manners that she kept writing under a pen name and never stopped feeling qualms about writing for money. While she liked to express her opinion and to be respected for her intellect by men and women alike, she was never interested in a public position. On the contrary, throughout her diary and later in the correspondence with her future husband, she shows disdain for contact with strangers and for public display. While she aspired to take part in public debates through her journalistic writing for *The Charleston News and Courier* in articles such as "Work for Women" and "Suffrage-Shrieking" (May 20, 1873), she felt that

women who openly meddled in public affairs were “disgusting.”<sup>6</sup> On May 14, 1862, Morgan writes:

I hate to hear women on political subjects; they invariably make fools of themselves, and it sickens me to see half a dozen talking at once of what they would do, and what ought to be done; it gives me the greatest disgust, so I generally contrive to absent myself from such gatherings, as I seldom participate. (73–74)<sup>7</sup>

Morgan seems to have believed in women's ability and duty to privately influence those who had a political voice—that is their male relations—instead of speaking up themselves. This view is expressed in a commentary in *The Charleston News and Courier*, written by Francis Warrington Dawson with the assistance of Morgan. In an article of November 6, 1888, the paper called upon the women of South Carolina to remind their male family members to cast their vote for the Democratic ticket in the national elections of that year. Sarah Morgan cut out the passage and glued it into her scrapbook:

Women cannot vote directly in South Carolina, but they have a considerable influence in political affairs, all the same. Although they cannot vote themselves, they can, if they like, control those who have the right to vote. Women of South Carolina! When your husbands and brothers and sons come home to day, at dinner time, ask them whether they have voted the straight Democratic ticket? And if they have not voted for the continuance of white rule and the suppression of negro domination in South Carolina, remind them that it is better, for the sake of their dear ones—and for the sake of peace in the family—that they hasten to the polls and vote at once. The women of the State—God bless them—can be depended on always, and in all weather.<sup>8</sup>

The article vividly illustrates women's integral role in the project of White supremacy. As moral guardians, women were accountable for reminding men of their political responsibilities. This elevated role as guarantors of men's political engagement seems to be

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<sup>6</sup> For Morgan's editorials see Roberts, *The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson*, 255–58.

<sup>7</sup> Another reason for Morgan not to take up the public rehabilitation of the South may be attributed to her disillusionment with the South, her home country, due to its failure to prosecute and bring to punishment the murderer of her husband, who had been shot dead by a neighbor on March 12, 1889, when defending the reputation of the family's governess. The murderer was subsequently acquitted by the Charleston judiciary. In consequence, Sarah Morgan Dawson turned her back on the US and followed her diplomat son, Warrington, to Paris, where she died in 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson, Sarah Morgan. Newspaper articles by Cap. Francis W. Dawson. Charleston, SC., 1880–1897. *Francis Warrington Dawson Family Papers*.



based on the claim that the women have proven themselves as reliable in “all weather”—likely a reference to South Carolinian women’s staunch support of the Confederacy while under immense emotional, physical, and psychological pressure during the war. Hence, women’s war activities on the home front, Morgan maintains, earned them the South’s trust and the right to control those with an official franchise. This evidence suggests that Southern femininity now held a political element that went beyond moral family welfare and extended into the public realm.

In contrast to the more seclusive Sarah Morgan, former plantation mistress, Ella Gertrude Thomas, was an active UDC member and aspired to and had the chance to become a public figure. Throughout the war and especially during the early Reconstruction period, Thomas expressed exasperation at the incompetence of Southern men and dissatisfaction with household chores getting in her way of thinking and writing. Shortly after the war, in July 1866, she took the first opportunity to assert her newly won freedoms of female agency by travelling alone to the second meeting of the alumnae of Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

With her children grown, Thomas reluctantly took on the role of provider by teaching and renting out rooms. She also became increasingly involved with welfare and reform organizations. Starting out with the Ladies’ Missionary Society of St. John’s Methodist Church in Augusta and with a literary club, she went on to become a member and later the vice president of the Augusta chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. In 1893, Thomas left Augusta to live with her son in Atlanta, where she worked with Mary Latimer McLendon for the creation of the Industrial School for Girls in Milledgeville, Georgia. She joined local and national women’s suffrage organizations and attended the 1895 meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in Atlanta. In 1899, at the age of 65, she became president of the Georgia Woman Suffrage Association (GWSA). In this

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<sup>9</sup> Passages from Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas’s diary refer to the typed manuscript pages in the Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. Her trip to Wesleyan Female College is recorded on pages 101–02.

capacity, she spoke and wrote publicly and was recognized at her death in 1907 as one of Georgia's leading public female figures.<sup>10</sup>

Ella Gertrude Thomas was born in 1834 into the Deep South planter elite, which totaled at most six percent of Southern Whites. As a mother of ten children (seven of whom lived past the age of five), she came to fight for social reform and women's rights across classes (if not races) and at the same time held important posts in the UDC at the local and national level. While she lost her property and the accustomed life of leisure due to the war, Thomas did not yearn for a return of antebellum gender and class relations. Instead, she actively promoted women's emancipation. Thomas campaigned under her maiden name of Clanton, refusing to be known as Mrs. Jefferson Thomas, as tradition dictated. At the same time, she worked for an organization whose main objective was to celebrate the memory of the Confederacy.<sup>11</sup> As for Andrews, Thomas's UDC membership served a twofold purpose. On the one hand, her involvement in memorial work expressed regional pride and marked her as part of the antebellum and New South Georgia elite. On the other hand, membership was a necessity for gaining public acceptance and securing a national stage in the pursuit of social reform and woman suffrage. For Southern women the war years meant hardship, and loss of family members, as the diaries show, but at the same time they meant female rebellion, independent management of household affairs, facing Yankee raids, lending all imaginable support (material, mental, and emotional) to the troops, and asserting oneself without the help of male protectors.

Publicly active Southern women's engagement in the UDC is therefore not a paradox of emancipated lives versus old-fashioned but glorified gender hierarchies. On the contrary, the UDC provided a legitimate stage for women to join public debates on Civil War history, school curricula, and race relations. In addition, the United Daughters celebrated the Confederacy as a joint venture of Southern men and women and thus as the cradle of Southern women's emancipation. Finally, participation in the UDC also set these White women off from African

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<sup>10</sup> See Painter 17–19.

<sup>11</sup> You can find the original mission statement of the UDC on their current website at [www.hqudc.org](http://www.hqudc.org); on the general aims and objectives of the UDC, see Gardner 117–19.

American women, perpetuating their assumption of racial supremacy without necessarily returning to Old South patriarchy and planter class dominance. White UDC members' exclusivity from Black women not only contributed to the retention of older attitudes toward Blacks, it also led to the implicit and often explicit support and validation of the new White supremacist terrorism.

At the end of the day, UDC membership allowed White Southern women to use new concepts of Southern femininity for their own feminist agenda. Tara McPherson, Nina Baym, and Drew Gilpin Faust have severally argued that one strategy of White Southern women to reclaim Old South privileges was to buy whole-heartedly into the concept of (New) Southern femininity. As McPherson outlines in her study of twentieth-century constructions of Southern womanhood, "patriarchal culture of the postwar South deployed the figure of the southern lady to discipline both White women who were enjoying the new freedoms born of wartime and the freed slaves claiming space and rights in the public realm" (19). While Black women responded to this manifestation of the southern lady with compliance and defiance, according to McPherson, White Southern women bought into "a return to the pedestal on which southern femininity was popularly situated" (19). In short, McPherson and others argue that White Southern women used, or rather performed, Southern femininity, that is, they played the belle or lady as a survival strategy. As has been illustrated, they also used it to emancipatory ends by actively engaging in the perpetuation of a mythic Old South and Lost Cause ideology, a myth that celebrated the Southern belle as its iconic representative of the rebirth of a "nation" defeated.

### **New South Femininity and Race Relations as Markers of Difference**

Part and parcel of this reconfiguration of the Southern lady and of Southern femininity was a shift in what McPherson calls "markers of difference," that is "social relations against which femininity takes shape and is performed" (21), such as gender, race, class, or region. White Southern women's postwar life-writing is marked by an increase in racist commentaries that feels disconcerting and somewhat surprising in the first place, considering the pervasive silence in the women's diaries when it comes to the enslaved before and during the war. This

hostility against the formerly enslaved has often been explained by a feeling of betrayal on the women's part as they had been heavily invested in the myth of benevolent slavery that rested on the assumption of reciprocal obligations. However, as will be illustrated, it may also be interpreted as part of a newly defined Southern femininity that had to reconfigure the racial paradigm. The role of benevolent mistress could no longer be invoked and had to be replaced by a different mode of racial relations.

Drew Gilpin Faust, in her seminal work on *Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, explained how the paternalistic slave system tied slave control to concepts of masculinity. When women enslavers were left to manage plantations, farms, and businesses, notions of female weakness that had served as justification for their subordinate position led to their failure to control the enslaved and to frustration and eventually rebellion against being left responsible. Hence, women came to regard themselves as victims rather than beneficiaries of slavery. As Faust puts it,

white women had reaped slavery's benefits throughout its existence in the colonial and antebellum South. But they could not be its everyday managers without in some measure failing to be what they understood as female. The authority of their class and race could not overcome the dependence they had learned to identify as the essence of their womanhood. (70)

In "Altars of Sacrifice," Faust even goes so far as to proclaim that it might have been because of the women that the South lost the war as they rebelled against the prescriptive ideology of female sacrifice established for them by the male elite. Women began to dissent from roles as moral custodians of public as well as domestic culture when the doctrines of paternalism that these roles emanated from were violated. An inextricable part of planter's paternalistic responsibility was protection and sustenance of women. When this was no longer secured, women felt abandoned and betrayed. At the end of the day, the Civil War challenged notions of Southern femininity as defined against a masculine and racial other, making a reconfiguration of these social relations necessary. Hence, the discursive construction of racial hierarchies took on new forms.

The seeds for the later handling of race discourse under the auspices of the United Daughters of the Confederacy were planted in the wartime journals. In his study *Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865–1915*, Stephen K. Prince sketches how “throughout the formative years of Jim Crow, White supremacists and African Americans waged a literary war for the soul of the South” (209). It was a war about control of the image and the definition of the New South on a national scale. Ultimately, and tragically, Southern Whites won the day, and White supremacy remained inviolate in the former Confederate states until the mid-twentieth century. Part of this literary war was the UDC’s organized publication of personal war narratives by Southern women, texts in which the authors stylized themselves not only as racially superior, but also as experts on slavery and race.

This literary and fictional strategy of presumed expertise appears in many diary entries written after the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln’s declaration in combination with invading Union troops resulted in an ever-increasing exodus of formerly enslaved people from the Southern states. Before the Proclamation, enslaved individuals are almost never mentioned. Yet, Black men, women, and children become topics of interest whom the journal writers describe and analyze as soon as they begin leaving the White women’s homes. Diarists claim to intimately know and understand the nature and character of their former slaves and, by implication, of African Americans. From this “expert” vantage point, the diarists conclude that the system of so-called patriarchal benevolence, as substantiated in the institution of slavery, was the only method by which to ensure both peaceful race relations and the survival of the Black race. Throughout the antebellum era, White benevolence had been one of the common defenses by which Southern politicians and Southern elite typically justified slavery. In the postwar era, “race knowledge” became Southern Whites’ most empowering and destructive tool in their fight for cultural and political supremacy. Ultimately, Southern women’s awakening, in their private records, to the existence of formerly enslaved Blacks as human beings paved the way for their cultural role as race “experts” in the postbellum years.

Many prominent Northerners added their voices to this effort of regaining cultural and political supremacy. Scientists such as Harvard's zoologist and paleontologist Louis Agassiz and even former abolitionists such as Samuel Gridley Howe corresponded with political and freedmen's bureau officials to opine on White supremacy and against civil rights and Black suffrage.<sup>12</sup> As Sandra H. Petrulionis explains in her work on the antislavery movement in Thoreau's Concord, "[i]n the midst of the Civil War, Agassiz would correspond with Samuel Gridley Howe, then working for the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, and advise strongly against the social integration of Blacks and Whites in postwar America, arguing among other racially motivated conclusions that Blacks were incapable of 'self-government'" (195).<sup>13</sup>

Until 1863, the diarists of this study rarely mention enslaved men and women. When Andrews remarks that all her "preparations were made [for a party], even the bows of ribbon pinned on my undersleeves" without mentioning the agents of the preparations, they become conspicuous by their absence. Sometimes, the diarists would mention individuals by name when something out of the ordinary happens. Such instances often serve as the only reminder that slavery, and being served, is a constant fact in the lives of the White diarists.

On January 30, 1863, Sarah Morgan, for example, mentions for the first time Malvina, one of the enslaved women in her place of residence. Morgan reports that her close friend Anna, in her eagerness of getting ready for her "beau," had rudely smacked Malvina's face for not working quickly enough, causing her cheek to turn a "faint dingy pink" and making it "tingle" long after the fact. Morgan is shocked at witnessing such violent behavior in her friend and cannot refrain from commenting on it, although she does so indirectly. She mockingly justifies Anna's behavior by saying that she would probably have acted similarly if she had been expecting her beau. Then Morgan imagines the scene that would ensue:

Suppose I heard my Capt Lewis was down stairs, wouldn't I slap Mal, and Miriam [her sister] too, in my excitement? Good Gwacious [sic]! What a row to make! Yes! After boxing my maid and pinching my sister (bless her honest eyes!) I dare say I'd skip down

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<sup>12</sup> See Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science" and McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality*.

<sup>13</sup> See also McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 145–46; and Agassiz, *Louis Agassiz*, 594–612.

and putting that same right hand in his, cry "Dearest Charley!" with the sweetest smile on lips that had just angrily cried "You ugly beast!" (417)

Morgan parodies the double standard of Southern ladies who put on the sweetest smile and "look the very personification of amiability" (417) in front of their guests while unobserved by strangers they act cruelly towards their Black inferiors.

At this time, Morgan is turned invalid by a fall and takes on an outsider's perspective. Unable to move, she cannot participate in the bustle of getting ready but can only look on from her bed. Her sister Miriam and her friend Anna literally bury her under piles of clothing while changing, so that Malvina has to come to her rescue: "[Miriam] had so buried me under cast off skirts, cards, and dresses that Malvina, with her cheek still tingling with the slap of her ungrateful mistress, had to come to the rescue, and excavate me from the chaotic mass under which my inhuman sister had left me, before I could be visible" (417). In this scene, Morgan shares a brief moment of invisibility with Malvina, which is the moment that she recognizes and mentions her but fails to go so far as to openly sympathize: "Mal and I should have sympathized;—only we didn't" (417). The two women share a moment of silent compassion, but their inability to communicate any sympathy for each other hints at the incompatibility of their situations. Apart from this occasion, Malvina is excluded from Morgan's diary world.

Given her diary's lack of attention to enslaved men and women, it comes as a surprise when Ella Gertrude Thomas on December 26, 1864, mentions writing "tickets," that is travel passes so that her slaves can visit their kin over Christmas. Remarkably, she does so in a moment of wondering whether slavery might be a thing of times past by the next Christmas. In fact, she is inscribing herself as a benevolent mistress, handing tickets to the enslaved so that they can spend a lovely holiday. It seems that she has arrived at a stage in which she reflects on the presence of slaves and the institution of slavery because its extinction is close at hand. General Sherman's Union army was closing in, and Union victories in the winter of 1864 were dampening the optimism of Southerners. The impending abolition of slavery recalibrated the women's attention to their relation to and understanding of people whose presence and

enforced labor they had unquestioningly relied on. Only when their own lives were likely to be affected, i.e. their comfort dislodged, did they take notice.<sup>14</sup>

Postbellum society, North and South, assumed that Southern women must be experts on race relations because they had spent most of their lives together with slaves, which granted them such a status. Northerners might talk about Blacks they knew or who lived nearby, but in the eyes of Southerners they would remain amateurs in comparison to the experience of Southerners.

Most female memoirists of the war start their recollections of “Dixie” with a childhood episode that highlights their close relation to slaves. Prototypical here is Mary Norcott Bryan’s (1841–1925) *A Grandmother’s Recollection of Dixie* (ca. 1912), written for her children when she was in her seventies. After an introductory paragraph of situating herself as writer, she deplores that her offspring “will never know the tender tie that existed between mistress and servant” (3). She especially emphasizes how “during the Civil War, when on plantation after plantation the mansions were occupied only by wives and daughters, not a disloyal act or word ever occurred” on the slaves’ part (3).

Ella Gertrude Thomas also stresses her racial expertise in her postwar journaling. She repeatedly comments on racial politics on the basis of her personal experiences and first-hand observations. A passage from her June 26, 1869, diary entry vividly illustrates this tendency. Commenting on the upward social mobility of the formerly enslaved, she observes, “*I see social equality between our uneducated women & our late servants, & I see the contrast between Black as well as mulatto women who have (without the education of books) been trained under the most refined associations. I am forced to see the difference between them & some white help I have employed*” (Burr 320–21, emphasis added). Thomas clearly marks herself as an expert by first-hand experience: she sees, or is made to see even against her will (“forced”) how race relations play out, and therefore, she assumes authority in joining the debate on race politics and education. In the quoted instance, she is advocating for compulsory education for boys because she fears that White people’s “superiority of race

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<sup>14</sup> See *Ella Gertrude Thomas Diaries, Sept. 22, 1864–Oct. 14, 1866*, 30.



by nature” will be eradicated by the education of the formerly enslaved (321). Thomas suggests that anti-miscegenation laws would be unnecessary if only White boys received a thorough enough education. She adds that in contrast to males, “girls require no training. Natural feminine instinct will be their guide, as it ever has been” (322). This passage encapsulates Thomas’s emancipatory strategy of claiming superior racial expertise for women. According to Thomas, former women enslavers do not need special education but can build on their daily experiences and their natural feminine instincts. In this regard, Thomas believes women to easily excel over male nature (marked by sexual drive), which needs to be held in check by education. It becomes apparent how Thomas’s strife for women’s emancipation is intricately tied to essentialist notions about race and sex. Talking down from her high horse of racial expertise, she urges Southern men to focus on reform and legislation that would elevate the White race to their appropriate and natural position.

Virginia Ingraham Burr, who studied Thomas’s postwar scrapbooks, was able to locate an 1887 newspaper article clipping, probably from the *Augusta Chronicle* or the *Augusta Evening News*, that shows how Thomas supported the Blair bill for common education: “Education should be compulsory. Nor would I permit a man to vote who could not read and write. I know little politics, but I do not undervalue the great privilege of the ballot box [...]. [L]et us rather be taxed to educate the colored families whose fathers labored faithfully for us, than to pay a pension to support the Union soldiers who fought against us” (449). Paying the necessary lip-service to gender norms with her disclaimer of not knowing much politics, Thomas unabashedly participates in the public (political) debate on education. Her commentary rings of White Southern paternalism that posits Whites as taking care of the formerly enslaved. In addition, she adopts the voice of the South (“us”) and firmly positions herself as a Confederate who clearly demarcates Southerners (including its people of color) from Northerners. Her political weight as a woman rests on her Confederate identity and on the continued myth of benevolent slavery that she turns into the postwar narrative of benevolent Southern White supremacy.

Andrews also makes extensive use of footnotes and commentary in her 1908 diary publication to remark on her racial expertise. Just as with Morgan and Thomas, mentions of the enslaved increase towards the end of the war. In her journal, Andrews emphasizes the simple but faithful character of the enslaved and draws them as victims of Northern corruption. In editorial comments, she repeats the idea of a benevolent master-slave relationship and paints herself as a proper judge of “negro character,” as she calls it. On June 5, 1865, for example, Andrews relates how the family survived on the hiring out of Uncle Osborne. In 1908, she adds the following commentary: “The end of this good old negro is a pathetic example of the unavoidable tragedies that have so often followed the severing of the old ties between master and servant throughout the South” (286). She then relates how her father took care of Osborne in old age but could not prevent him from dying alone in misery, “looking for the old home” (287). She adds: “It was a source of bitter regret to my father and to us all, that his faithfulness and devotion should have met with no better reward” (287). In this footnote, Andrews claims that emancipation and Reconstruction had destroyed the ties between what she considered to be the master race and the inferior Black race. Because of this unnatural disruption, as she sees it, Blacks became the pitiable victims of Northern race politics.

Another example that highlights Andrews claim of knowing the formerly enslaved intimately and therefore being a proper judge of their nature and character is a commentary she adds a day later concerning Sophia, an enslaved woman that looked after her during childhood: “I am sorry to say that my dear old mammy—Sophia by name—while so superior, and as genuine a ‘lady’ as I ever knew, in other respects, shared the weakness of her race in regard to chastity” (294). She then explains how Sophia had five children by different men, with two of whom Andrews grew up. They were then purchased by their assumed White father with Sophia’s consent. Andrews blatantly lays the blame for the children born out of wedlock at Sophia’s door, adding, “the dear old lady—I use the word advisedly, for she was one in spite of her inherited instincts, which would make it unfair to judge her by the white woman’s standard” (294). As typical of White women enslavers, Andrews explains interracial relationships and sexual abuse of enslaved women with the women’s oversexed nature. In

fact, one of the reasons some White elite women objected to slavery was on this very ground, that is, what they believed to be the sexual corruption of husbands and relatives by the Black women they owned. Andrews is quick to add though that it is not the woman's fault but her nature's, legitimizing the idea of White supremacy to keep the Black race in check.

She deliberately voices her racist essentialist notions of Blacks' inferior nature in her conclusion when she celebrates the actions of the Ku Klux Klan and denounces Reconstruction politics of racial equality as disastrous. It is worth quoting this passage in full to understand Andrews's approach:

It was the hand that struck us after we were down that bore hardest [Reconstruction]; yet even its iron weight was not enough to break the spirit of a people in whom the Anglo-Saxon blood of our fathers still flows uncontaminated; [...] "The Invisible Empire," [...] through secret vigilance and masterful strategy saved the civilization they were forbidden to defend by open force. [...] Forced against our will, and against the simplest biological and ethnological laws, into an unnatural political marriage that has brought forth as its monstrous offspring a race problem in comparison with which the Cretan Minotaur was a suckling calf. (386)

She concludes by outlining the unnaturalness of the idea of racial equality that would lead to a race war, which, as she notes in relief, was prevented by Southerners and White supremacist terror that secured the dominance of her race, as, in Andrews's view, it should be according to the law of nature (biology and ethnology).

As this and other examples of the representation of master-slave relations in the diaries illustrate, Southern women narratively framed themselves as experts on slaves and as "tamers" of Black rebelliousness. These beliefs were part and parcel of a literary strategy usually attributed to Southern male authors who claimed to be authorities on race to assert absolute White supremacist control over Blacks in postbellum racial affairs. White Southern women, however, participated in this literary endeavor and contributed tales of benevolent enslavement and of White superiority on a large scale.

### **Conclusion: New South Racist-Feminist Femininity**

During the war, private journals had provided White Southern women with a space in which to explore secret ideas, thoughts, and emotions. In the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow era, their memoirs influenced the perception of the Civil War, the antebellum South, and race relations for generations of Americans to come. In the war years, diary keeping had helped White women to contest notions of sacrificing and passive womanhood and in its aftermath it was instrumentalized by former women enslavers to navigate new notions of Southern femininity by claiming a substantial role for the South and themselves as iconic figures of southernness in the national imaginary. In their memoirs and published diaries, inspired by the tragedies and romances they had read, they spun a tale of the South, which “bore the storm and the stress and the tragedy of those dark days” but “has risen again in splendor on the smiling prospect of a New South” (Andrews 387). As these lines from Andrews’s epilogue to her diary illustrate, White Southern men and women together told a tale of a reborn South, in which the Anglo-Saxon race ruled supreme.

White Southern women’s engagement in Civil War memory culture provided them with a means of emancipating themselves at the expense of the formerly enslaved. As McPherson and others claimed, they bought into a return to the pedestal but on their own terms. They actively contributed to the construction of a Southern lady and Southern femininity that reconfigured notions of masculinity and race as markers of difference, giving more leeway to women’s participation in the public sphere. Southern women’s postbellum women’s rights activism and other reformist endeavors were part of this renegotiation and not set against it. To a substantial degree, Southern women’s agency and gender progressivism was enabled by the promotion of racial hierarchies and their active engagement in the glorification of the Southern past.

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