

# Travelling with Susie King Taylor

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*I commend the narrative to those who love the plain record of simple lives led in stormy periods.*

-- Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1902

*There is nothing even vaguely resembling Susie King Taylor's small volume of random recollections.*

-- Willie Lee Rose, 1987

*We have been knowers, but we have not been known.*

-- Joanne M. Braxton, 1989

*It is only through her actions that we clearly hear her theory.*

-- Elsa Barkley Brown, 1990

Susie King Taylor's *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Coloured Troops Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers*, published in 1902, is a rare text.<sup>1</sup> It is the only published memoir authored by an African-American woman who was an active participant in the military campaigns of the Civil War. Taylor's description of slavery, emancipation, war, and her life as a freed woman, educator, nurse, army wife and, later, officer of the Women's Relief Corps and respected middle-class club woman of Boston presents the historian with a complex document. This autobiographical narrative actively seeks to intervene in the contests over the meaning of the Civil War in historical memory that raged at the turn of the century as pundits attempted to assuage regional tension and clear the way for the rise of the "New South."<sup>2</sup> "I have seen the terrors of that war," Taylor assures us, and on the basis of this experience she positions herself as authorized arbitrator of the conflict's historical significance as well as its contemporary meaning (119). Taylor does not encourage us to see her as merely an object of historical forces, she claims for herself an authority that exceeds that of the eyewitness and encompasses that of judge in the court of History. I find in Taylor's work a purposeful set of strategies in dialogue with other works aimed at elevating black women as knowers and arbitrators – and not simply as experiencers – of the past. A close examination of Taylor's memoir and the historiographical contexts within which it has

been set provides insight into the problematics of historical authority and the specific challenge it posed for black women autobiographers in this period.

This essay examines the attempts to promote *Reminiscences* as a singular text of the Civil War – attempts that at times have served to render the text fairly mute despite the enthusiasm of its champions. I expose the shared epistemological ground undergirding the sponsoring of *Reminiscences* by Colonel Higginson (Taylor’s commanding officer during the Civil War and the text’s first endorser in 1902) and underlying the repositioning of the book by women’s historian Willie Lee Rose in her introduction to the 1988 edition. Focusing on the question of genre, and building on the recent work of others who have taken Susie King Taylor’s writings to be more than simply an “unadorned chronicle of events,” I consider the undermining effects of white sponsorship of this text and the strategies Taylor nonetheless employs to insist on the subjectifying power of her authorial presence (23). I expose the tendency of critics to position *Reminiscences* as a somewhat mediocre example of women’s autobiographical writing in the late nineteenth century, despite its having little in common with other works in this category. Consequently, Taylor’s text is, once again, misrecognized and imagined as lacking the features of successful works in that genre. I present material drawn from *Reminiscences* that remind us of facets of her story and her authorship that remain out of keeping with this categorization, explicating the issues of authorial voice and historical authority along the way.

In part, I argue, it is the wrongful assignment of this work as a document of the Civil War, rather than as a document of its own time of production (circa 1900), that serves to misidentify the text as a slave narrative. This imprecision results in the overlooking of the significant fact of Taylor’s emancipation, her forty years spent as a free woman, and her age at the time of the publication of her narrative – as if these features did not matter to her autobiographical authorship. The interpretive result undercuts Taylor’s subjective presence and too closely approximates the denial of the slave’s full humanity. Under slavery’s rules, slave-witnesses were permitted to give mechanistic reportage, but their potential for bearing subjective testimony – that is for evincing discernment or delivering judgment, especially that which might implicate a white person in a crime – was systematically denied to them. As a result, as I will show, Taylor’s knowledge of the Civil War has been reductively relegated to that of an inert eye that *records* but does not *see* or is incapable of evaluating what is being seen.

I make my own contribution to a literary and historical analysis of this text by suggesting the lens of travel literature as a useful mechanism through which to view Taylor’s narration of the Civil War and its aftermath. Recent critical treatments of travel literature, travel literature written by women in particular, make clear the subjectifying

potential this genre of writing held for subaltern authors in this period. Such criticism permits us, I argue, to think more insightfully about the problematics of black female authorship. Through my reassignment and analysis of Taylor's work as an autobiographical work of travel literature, I hope to reposition the text in relation to its critics and potential future readers so that Taylor's worth as a fully subjectified witness to history can be fully grasped. Finally, I posit that expanding our notion of what it means to "give witness" permits Taylor's knowledge of the Civil War and the contemporary moment to stand as grounded in an experience in a way that authorizes her to speak about history without being reduced to that experience. Nor should Taylor be denied the ability to assign the war meaning for others. By resituating *Reminiscences*, I contribute to a growing body of commentary that acknowledges this work's significance to our understanding of the subaltern problematics of establishing subjective historical authority through writing.

### **Distinctiveness, Shorn of Distinction: A "Plain Record" of a "Simple Life"**

As rare a document as it is, it should come as no surprise that distinctiveness has been the platform upon which *Reminiscences* is often presented for readers' consumption. Primary examples include the endorsement by Civil War colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson that appears in the preface to the first edition. Higginson defends the worth of Taylor's text by declaring that the author was "exceptional among the laundresses" for her literacy and that her "whole life and career were most estimable" (23-24).<sup>3</sup> Higginson overdetermines Taylor as exceptional with this backward compliment that elevates her above other women attending military regiments during the conflict and by pointing out the multiplicity of her marginality as a woman, a black woman, and a witness to a black regiment: "No such description of the war has ever been given," Higginson tells us, and the Union's "200,000 black soldiers [...] have never before been delineated from the woman's point of view," all of which gives this volume "peculiar interest" (23). Higginson's intention to lend worth to the memoir, draw readers in, and authenticate it is clear. At the same time, the somewhat "peculiar" attention that Higginson, and others since, has brought to bear on the singularity of *Reminiscences* threatens to sum up the value of the text and reduce it thereby to a quizzical anomaly, as if the fact of its surprising existence alone comprises the sum total of its importance as a memoir.

By emphasizing the distinctiveness of *Reminiscences*, these commentators have exoticized Taylor as an author; as a result, her descriptions of life during the Civil War, and the import of her remarks, are in danger of being drowned out.<sup>4</sup> Shorn of interpretive content by a framing of exceptionalism, Taylor has been represented as the author of an "unadorned chronicle of events" to such an extent that, at times, her voice has been muted as an example of American autobiographical literature altogether (14). Higginson,

for example, ends his endorsement by recommending the memoir as a “plain” product of a “simple life,” a reference to Taylor’s humble stature as a woman and a freed person (24). This summation counteracts the potential power suggested by his earlier assessment of this text – as unparalleled – and serves to diminish Taylor’s authorial power to contribute complex insight into the historical circumstances of her life. Higginson’s prefatory letter was the first of many authenticating gestures that would simultaneously celebrate *Reminiscences* while calling into question the value of its interpretive content. At the other end of the century, in a scholarly introduction to a new publication of *Reminiscences*, Willie Lee Rose echoed Higginson’s assignation of the text as an unembellished “random recollection” of the war (7). According to Rose, and apparently in view of the brevity of Taylor’s observations, “it remains what Colonel Higginson said it was”: a simple record of the war lacking in embellishment (16).<sup>5</sup> Although Rose reveals genuine admiration for Taylor and clearly assigns value to her text for its singularity, she, even more directly than Higginson, succeeds in undercutting Taylor’s authorship. She attributes severe myopia to “young Susie’s” eyewitness account of the war with the patronizing assertion that Taylor’s “inability [...] to set her war experiences into a wider perspective [is not the] fault of Susie’s, but it deprives the reader of a certain detachment that must be supplied on one’s own” (13). Rose thus empties *Reminiscences* of the value that Higginson assigned it – as an interesting, even if purely mechanistic, window onto the war – by declaring the narrator of *Reminiscences* to be less capable of discerning the wider meaning of the war than even its readers. At the same time, Rose bemoans the lack of personal detail in *Reminiscences* – personal revelations that she points out might have “been treasured today in light of the feminist movement” (13). Taylor can not seem to catch a break. Either her memoir does not qualify as a work of autobiography, lacking as it does a sense of authorial interiority, or the circumscribed nature of the author’s personal experience renders it less useful as a work of history. Clearly, radical singularity – at least in terms of race and gender – has its drawbacks when it comes to establishing oneself as a historical witness.

The problem is not one of intent or sympathy. Clearly, both Higginson and Rose made significant efforts to identify and develop a readership for *Reminiscences*. The problem, as I will demonstrate, is their excessive focus upon Taylor as a subaltern narrator who, as a consequence of her promoters’ overidentification of herself with her topic, is denied the power to spectacularize the historical landscape she attempts to narrate. Rose contends that Taylor “does not probe deeply the responsibility national leaders must bear for the betrayal before the bar of history, even though one reads between the lines that she is aware of it” (16). This portrayal directly contrasts with the narrating position Taylor seeks to establish for herself. Her narrative explicitly intervenes in the easing of sectional tensions in the 1890s and the historical amnesia accompanying it to remind readers that the war was fought against a great evil, one that had yet to be stamped out even in the

“New South.” The soaring rate of lynching and the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation in the decade that preceded the publication of her work in 1902 infuses her narration of the war and provides the political incentive and context for her writing, but it is no static backdrop. Taylor positions herself as the mature and wise historical interpreter of not only the Civil War but also of her contemporary moment and of a tragic national history of race relations writ large:

For two hundred years we had toiled for them; the war of 1861 came and was ended, and we thought our race was forever free from bondage, and that the two races could live in unity with each other, but when we read almost every day what is being done to my race by some whites in the South, I sometimes ask, was the war in vain? Has it brought freedom, in the full sense of the word, or has it made our condition more hopeless?

In this “land of the free” we are burned, tortured, and denied a fair trial, murdered for any imaginary wrong conceived in the brain of the negro-hating white man. There is no redress for us from a government which promised to protect all under its flag. It seems a mystery to me. They say, “One flag, one nation, one country indivisible.” Is this true? Can we say this truthfully, when one race is allowed to burn, hang, and inflict the most horrible torture weekly, monthly, on another? No, we cannot sing, “My Country ’t is of thee, Sweet land of Liberty”! It is a hollow mockery. The Southland laws are all on the side of the white, and they do just as they like to the negro, whether in the right or not. (135-36)

In addition to these frequent asides to the reader, which not only convey anger but also claim a bird’s eye view that sets the war in its larger historical context, Taylor also relates a ground-level view with stories of her movement with the 33rd regiment, how battles were won, and what life was like in camp between campaigns. Much of Taylor’s text is taken up with providing the reader with the truths of the war, both large and small: the truth of the larger meaning of the war for black freedom as outlined in the quote above, but also the truth of the risks she took personally, the truth behind black and white rumors about Yankees that circulated prior and throughout the war, and the truth of the service that some white Union officers rendered to her race. Admiring portraits of the white officers she worked most closely with distinguish them as individuals and justify their reputations as war heroes and friends of her race. Taylor is proud of the part she played in the war and rightly attributes it to the significance of the circumstances that drew her into contact with key decision-makers on policies that affected freedpersons most directly and immediately. She continually reminds the reader of her close proximity to important military figures and the respectful interactions she had with them. Given the predominance of this theme in *Reminiscences*, Rose’s contention in her preface that “young Susie was not thoroughly aware of the unique character of the sector of the war in

which she participated, or of the white people with whom her lot was cast” is hard to explain (13). Likewise, Rose’s assertion that “young Susie” does not seem “fully aware of the not-so-subtle economic disadvantages her race endured in the North in this ‘nadir’ of race relations” ignores the outbursts of angry condemnation that punctuate the last third of Taylor’s text (16). Taylor refers multiple times to the devastation following the war; she makes specific reference to the financial collapse that the Freedmen’s Bureau generated. She wonders about the lack of black landownership in the North, complains bitterly about being denied a pension either as a nurse or as the widow of a veteran, and insists that the motivation for her writing is to hold leaders responsible for such ruin – that “in this ‘land of the free’ [...] there is no redress from a government which promised to protect all under its flag” (135-36). There is no need to read between these lines, unless one refuses to assign such lines real meaning. Rather than an unselfconscious naïf whose “random recollections” accidentally touch upon major developments of the war and Reconstruction, Taylor comes across, to my mind, as quite cognizant of the policy debates and military manoeuvres to which she was witness and supremely critical of the failures of leaders who were charged with safeguarding the gains won through bloodshed (7). In contrast, Rose’s profile of “young Susie” as an underage and unwitting onlooker to the war prepares contemporary readers of the reissued text for a narrative that cannot evaluate or determine meaning.

Part of the problem lies with the misassignment of *Reminiscences* to an earlier period. Rose seems to forget that the writer of *Reminiscences* is not “young Susie.” Taylor was fifty-four years of age when she wrote her memoir. While Colonel Higginson, who was influenced by a problematic chivalry, may have taken pains to portray Susie King Taylor as a respectable wife to the point of condescension, Rose’s portrait literally reduces the author of *Reminiscences* to a naive child. This is so despite the latter-day political purposes Taylor identifies as motivating her decision to publish her memoirs and despite the fact that a third of the text addresses the years between the war and the memoir’s publication at the turn of the century. Rose’s introduction also ignores the punctilious character of Taylor’s recall of the war. The recall Taylor exhibits is not purely of an experiential nature, and, I argue, was not meant to be read as if through the eyes of a child. Why, for instance, does Taylor tell us the date (23 January 1863) that the 33rd Regiment travels upriver to St. Mary’s (55)? It is not that Taylor simply happens to recall this particular date; this was not an accident or the consequence of a writer’s idiosyncratic decision. The battle of St. Mary’s was highly publicized and widely discussed as a key turning point in the use of black troops. Taylor assumes a level of familiarity with the events of the Civil War on the part of her reader, perhaps because the reader she anticipates would have a particular interest in the Civil War and black participation in it. Taylor expects that mention of the date alone, like that of 10 January 1863 (when she arrives with the 33rd in Jacksonville, Florida), to convey the historical weight of the

impressions she thereafter narrates and to provide a frame for her observations regarding the overall meaning of the war in the contemporary moment. Such attention to detail tells us we are reading History and not just personal memory.

A close look at *Reminiscences* discloses that Taylor offers her readers anything but a simple recounting or unembellished recording of bygone events shorn of an authenticating autobiographical presence; nor does *Reminiscences* represent an uninformed or overly narrow view that is unable to provide a wider perspective on American race relations in its own present. I join with other recent readers of this text to affirm that the eyewitness account *Reminiscences* offers is an interpretative history, one that presents readers with a subtle autobiography that insists on the intertwined nature of the public and the personal. Taylor refuses the either/or of detachment/authenticity (or, in this case, the neither/nor of it) and asks that her experience be read as an authorization of her analysis of the war, its aftermath, and the politics of the text's present.<sup>6</sup> Both in content and form, this multi-faceted text illustrates the degree to which black women participated in the war itself and also fought in the war of words over the meaning of emancipation that proceeded for decades following the cessation of military conflict.

To reduce *Reminiscences* to a passive recounting would be to overlook, among other aspects of the text, the way that its author announces herself as the primary subject of the narrative. Taylor's insistence on this point tells us that, while the facts of the war may be *known*, the war can not be *understood* apart from the context of a individual's life lived as someone such as Susie King Taylor lived it. Susie King Taylor was born in 1848 on a plantation thirty-five miles from Savannah, Georgia. As she tells us with great dignity, she was born "under the slave law" (29).<sup>7</sup> She informs us that she was the first-born child of Hagar Ann, a waitress to the Grest family who married a man named Raymond Baker at the age of thirteen (25-26). It is unknown whether Baker was a freeman. Indeed, Taylor does not dwell on the legal status of her ancestors. I surmise a couple of reasons for this omission of detail. In the first place, while slavery is the spectre that haunts her text and caused the war that serves as this narrative's main event, Taylor is careful and deliberate throughout her narrative to never let slavery define her own identity or that of other members of her community. Her people are persons first, defined by their names, the dates of their lives, what they were known for, what happened to them, and who they married and birthed. Both by omission and by the inclusion of individualizing detail, Taylor assures us that neither she nor members of her community were defined by the status Southern slave law once accorded them. In the second place, Taylor's memoir attends much more to her matrilineal heritage, of which she takes great pride in recounting and knows a great deal. In fact, the first chapter of *Reminiscences* reads like an Old Testament genealogy – starting with comments about the half-Indian heritage and longevity of her great-great-grandmother (120 years), whose name was Dolly. Taylor

also knows the name of her great-grandmother (Susanna), who it was that she married (Peter Simons), that she was a “noted midwife,” the number of children she bore (twenty-four, twenty-three of them girls), her age at death (one hundred years), and its cause (stroke) and place (Savannah). Taylor knows and reveals her grandmother’s date of birth (1820), that this grandmother was named for Susie’s great-grandmother Dolly, and when and whom grandmother Dolly married (Fortune Lambert Reed, at the age of thirteen). (All this information appears on page 25.)

With these details, Taylor puts herself in the good company of her female ancestors, forces her reader to acknowledge and recognize her people, and defies a simple characterization of herself as ex-chattel, which might have triggered the assumption that she had no knowable personal history or no personal history worth knowing. Susie King Taylor did not appear out of thin air, and neither has this narrative, the chapter asserts. By beginning this way, Taylor commences the narrative of her life by immediately authorizing herself as the historian of her own personal life story which dovetails with her family’s history (a female lineage). She also makes clear from the start that her family history intertwines with that of the nation: the first thing we learn about her grandmother, beyond the spectacular length of her life, is that she “had seven children and five of her boys were in the Revolutionary War” (25). Right away, Taylor lets her reader know that these “reminiscences” will not be confined to military events but will reveal holistically the life of an American with deep roots in the historical struggles that defined the nation – a life lived as a nineteenth-century female and African American lived it and wished to tell it.<sup>8</sup>

Once her family’s lineage, its parallels with the nation’s history, and her own position as historian of this story are established in the first chapter, Taylor quickly moves on to explain how she came to find herself at the centre of some of the most important early events of the Civil War. In the mid-1850s, at a young age, Susie and two of her siblings left the plantation where their mother worked and were sent to Savannah to live with their emancipated grandmother who made her living through trade and renting rooms to boarders. Though Taylor spent much of her adolescence not as a member of a plantation household or as a field hand, she was not legally free. Nor did life as a legally free black in Savannah mean self-sovereignty for her grandmother. Emancipation in 1850s urban Georgia entailed white guardianship, a pass system, and the explicit denial of education. Such barriers required ingenuity to outwit. Taylor was educated surreptitiously by black women in the community who taught black children to read and write in their homes under the pretence of teaching them trade skills (29-30). Taylor offers up to the reader the memory of having to wrap her books in plain paper to hide them from the eyes of whites who would punish her and her educators for teaching her how to read and cipher (29-30). Implicitly, we understand this as one of the first of many outrages perpetrated upon her



race by Southern whites. As with the facts of her lineage, she relates the particulars of her surreptitious education precisely (including the names of her teachers and the street names of their homes) and with pride but also with a certain perfunctoriness, as if she does not intend to dwell upon those ignorant and easily fooled, but heartless and dangerous Southern whites who prompted the skills of subterfuge in those they tyrannized.

A dignified coldness characterizes this account of indignity. By way of “plain” speaking – speech that Higginson and Rose took for shallowness of analysis – Taylor establishes what I find to be a narrative voice of controlled and polite outrage.<sup>9</sup> From a noble height, Taylor subtly degrades the culture of the Southern planter class and castigates white Southerners as individuals. For example, the first, and only, image we receive of Southern white womanhood is that of Mrs. Grest, for whom Taylor’s mother worked as a waitress and who, Taylor tells us in a tight-lipped passage, used the enslaved children under her care to satisfy her own emotional needs, but only when it suited her to do so:

I have often been told by my mother of the care Mrs. Grest took of me. She was very fond of me, and I remember when my brother and I were small children, and Mr. Grest would go away on business, Mrs. Grest would place us at the foot of her bed to sleep and keep her company. Sometimes he would return home earlier than he had expected to; then she would put us on the floor. (26)

Rather than dredging up the most sordid and crushing details of enslaved existence, Taylor is subtle: with a few choice words she manages to portray white Southern womanhood as bereft of genuine motherly feeling, suggesting that slavery rendered the planter class incapable of true “fondness” or even genuine recognition of the humanity of those around them. Thus, with our very first and one of the only glimpses of life under slavery that Taylor permits her readers, Taylor successfully gains the reader’s trust by wielding an understated and decorous form of sarcasm.<sup>10</sup> She does this by demonstrating at once her own dignity and communicating a sense of respect for the propriety, and intelligence, of a reader who is presumed to be “in the know” about the horrors of slavery – either because of the shared circumstances of race or empathetic political affinity. Much of what follows clarifies that Taylor’s intended readership is made up of African Americans, and perhaps only incidentally sympathetic whites. To both potential audiences, she sums up her childhood experience of slavery succinctly and pointedly, sets a pattern of controlled purposefulness in her prose, and prepares the reader for further evidence that Southern whites were more dehumanized (whether defeminized or, even more often, unmanned) by slavery than were the people they called their property.

Life for blacks in Savannah was infused with a new sense of urgency in the spring of 1862, as the war and Yankee soldiers moved closer and whites became alarmed at the thought of losing their property to the Union Army. Taylor and her siblings were sent back to their mother in the countryside on 1 April 1862, just as the shelling of nearby Fort Pulaski began. Soon after their remove from the city, Union successes led to major-general David Hunter's designation of all slaves in the area free. This decision, made in April 1862, represented a major turning point in the war and in the lives of freed slaves who had previously strained under their designation as "contraband," or seized property of war, rather than as freedpersons (although that status would continue to be contested throughout the war). Immediately following the taking of Fort Pulaski, Taylor fled with an uncle and several of her cousins to put herself within reach of the Union Army and the possibility of escaping slave law, which was made more likely once she boarded a Union gunboat bound for St. Simons Island. There, the value of Taylor's literacy and skills such as sewing, cooking, and nursing immediately became evident to Union officers. In the months before the island was ordered evacuated, she was put in charge of organizing a school for the freedmen and their children (37). It was during this time that she met Edward King, a sergeant in the new black volunteer regiment composed of former slaves and formed under the authority of Colonel Higginson. Taylor soon married King and took charge of the small nursing corps accompanying the regiment on its way to Camp Saxton on the mainland. Before the year ended, Taylor had left enslaved life behind her, gotten married, established a school for freedpersons, started a nursing corps, set out for war with a regiment of armed forces – and saw the passing of her fourteenth birthday.

Taylor spent ages fourteen through seventeen serving the 33rd Regiment as a nurse, teacher, cook, laundress, and sometime weapons inspector. Within months of the end of the war, she gave birth to her first and only child, a son, and lost her husband who died from causes unrelated to his war service. In the fall of 1865, Taylor found herself an eighteen-year-old widow with a newborn child to support, living in Washington, D.C., without a pension for her own service to the nation and deprived of the benefit of a veteran's pension that Edward King's service to the Union should have provided. Drawing on her wartime experience as an educator of the newly free, Taylor established schools for black children and night schools for black adults, but these were short-lived enterprises because free schools, in large part headed by teachers who had moved to the South following the war, sprang up to address the same need. Like most other black women who lived in cities in this period, Taylor took employment as a maid, laundress, or cook in a number of wealthy women's homes until 1879, when, while travelling with one of these employers, she had the occasion to meet Russell Taylor, a middle-class black man living in Boston, whom she married. Settling into a respectable existence as a married woman in Boston in the 1880s, Susie King Taylor made the needs of Civil War veterans, especially black veterans, central to her clubwoman activities. In 1886 she

helped organize a Woman's Relief Corps in Boston as an auxiliary to the Union's veteran association, the GAR. In 1893 she became president of the auxiliary (133-34).

Taylor's publication of *Reminiscences* a few years later stemmed in part from her desire to bring dignity and appreciation to the black and white veterans of the Union Army as well as recognition to the women of her race who had contributed to the war effort, many of whom were currently engaged in community activism and public works of racial uplift.<sup>11</sup> Her motivation was to keep the sacrifices she and others made, and the bravery she and others showed, before the public. "Let us not forget that terrible war," Taylor opined (142), or the part played in the securing of black freedom by black women in particular:

There are many people who do not know what some of the colored women did during the war. There were hundreds who assisted the Union soldiers by hiding them and helping them to escape. [...] although [we] knew the penalty, should [we] be caught giving them aid. [...] These things should be kept in history before the people. There has never been a greater war in the United States than the one of 1861, where so many lives were lost, – not men alone but noble women as well. (141-42)

Encompassing Susie King Taylor's memories of life in the South under slavery, of the Civil War, and of life in the North as a black woman in the latter decades of the century, *Reminiscences* interrupts stereotypical views of former slaves as wholly debilitated products of an homogenously dehumanizing institution and disturbs readers' complacent view of freedom as a condition uncompromised by racial terror and debasement. The brevity and episodic character of the text has tempted reviewers and editors to bemoan what has been seen as missing elements of personal detail and complexity. In fact, as the examples above demonstrate, such detail and complexity exist, both at the level of individual experience and, more ambitiously, at the level of public history.

### **Neither Here Nor There: Defying Genre and Gender Categories**

Recently, Taylor's work has moved to the centre of several debates regarding post-bellum black writing and to arguments over genre. Higginson's designation of Taylor as "exceptional among the coloured laundresses" and Rose's insistence that "there is nothing even vaguely resembling Susie King Taylor's small volume of random recollections" assigns an isolation to *Reminiscences* that more recent editors and critics have rejected. Their criticism locates the memoir either within the historiographical context of war memoirs published at the turn of the century or, alternatively, within a tradition of black women's autobiographical writings that extends back to slave narratives written over a half century ago. Some critics attempt to do both.

Catherine Clinton, the most recent editor of the text, locates *Reminiscences* within the spate of male memoirs of the Civil War written at the turn of the century and segues from this discussion to an analysis of the links between Taylor's work and that of ex-slave Elizabeth Keckley and escaped slaves who wrote accounts of life in bondage during the antebellum era (Clinton vii-x). Joanne M. Braxton may have been the first literary critic to examine *Reminiscences* for the features it shares with antebellum slave narratives. She views Taylor's discussions of her care for the "boys" of the 33rd regiment as being in conformity with what Braxton terms "the outraged mother archetype," one that relies on a self-sacrificial and nurturing persona to establish moral authority with special attention paid to the trials and liberation of a grandmother figure. Braxton emphasizes continuity between Susie King Taylor's memoir and women's autobiographies in nineteenth-century America generally and black women's slave narratives in particular. Yet, she also notices differences between post-Reconstruction autobiographical writings by black women and slave narratives and views the former as generally "less overtly political" and lacking "the emotional confessional quality" of the latter (Braxton 40). Estelle C. Jelinek identifies a tendency towards explicit expressions of anger in post-Reconstruction black women's writing and notes that "the further away they (ex-slave autobiographers) are from their slave experiences when writing, the less time they spend on those experiences and the more likely they are to express anger" (Jelinek 88). Jelinek observes that Taylor's memoir is full of the same sort of pride and sense of achievement as that which "informs memoirs of white women from the South who survived the hardships of the war from the sidelines" (Jelinek 88). Braxton seems to recognize that *Reminiscences* pivots on generic categories and, rather than reducing *Reminiscences* to any one genre, Braxton rightly acknowledges the dialogue between *Reminiscences* and the multiple genres that Taylor would have had available to her as a reader. Another critic, Johnnie Stover, likewise refuses to assign *Reminiscences* to one genre and instead argues, "African American women autobiographers' resistance led them to create a new form in autobiography – not so much a subgenre as a countergenre" (Stover 15). While I do not agree with every conclusion these critics reach concerning Taylor's work (for instance, I do not find Taylor's outrage maternal in character so much as I find it judgmental in tone), I find these critics' insistence on the indeterminacy of genre helpful for thinking through the authorial struggle that engaged Taylor as a black woman writer. When we focus our attention on the ways that Taylor's strategies fall within and yet outside standard genre conventions, these readings equip us to celebrate Taylor's work for its distinctiveness without detaching it from its context or unduly segregating it from other texts.

At the same time, I argue that it is important to consider the ways that *Reminiscences* is unlike most slave narratives and carves out a new subjective space for its author by employing very different tone, pace, form, and format. However much in dialogue I believe Taylor to have been with other autobiographical works, particularly slave

narratives and Civil War memoirs of all stripes, it is useful to remember that, in fact, it is not a slave narrative and does not much resemble one, apart from the inclusion of endorsements by Higginson and Trowbridge (another white officer whose brief letter is also included in the preface to the 1902 edition). Admittedly, these endorsements echo letters that typically accompanied narratives written by escaped slaves in the antebellum period. But times had changed by the time Taylor published *Reminiscences*, and, I argue, neither Higginson's nor Trowbridge's letter contained the power to wrest control of the narrative away from its author the way it might have for many (white) readers had it been published a half-century before. In part, the reason for this is the stance Taylor takes as a *historian* of the war and an authorized interpreter of its meaning. The narrator of *Reminiscences* does not sound much like the narrators of antebellum slave narratives. Taylor does not plead with a white, largely female, audience to believe in a tale principally of woe as she might have were this written for an antebellum abolitionist audience. Suffering from a presumably skeptical audience does not appear to be a burden Taylor bears. As Braxton notes, Taylor's is a success story, albeit one with a bitter edge to its inspirational message, considering the way that the meaning of the war as a crusade for racial emancipation was still being fought over. However angry its author is with the present state of affairs, particularly "lynch law," Jim Crow segregation in the South, and the personal plight of impoverished veterans, *Reminiscences* does not read like an exposé, nor does its narrator position her political commentary as part of an ideological argument as did the authors of antebellum slave narratives. Rather, we realize, in the last few chapters especially, that what we are reading is a call to arms from a narrator who has already proven her worth as a combatant for racial justice in the arena that was the Civil War, and from one who is ready to do battle again in the war of words over its consequences.

Perhaps the most powerful way in which Taylor's work marks a definitive departure from writings by black women in the nineteenth century – whether in the form of slave narratives or domestic fiction – lies with the control she exhibits over her physical presence and sexuality. Though Lisa Long attributes the power of Taylor's text in part to her ability to present herself as a "nursing body," in fact we get negligible glimpses of her nursing the men under her care (Long 198-99). Although her service is central to her narrative, Taylor strictly avoids placing herself as the star of emotive scenes of tender care in her memoir. Nor does she appeal to readers as a young wife or widow – her two marriages and her own experiences as a mother are quite deliberately left out of her 'reminiscences' until the final chapter's description of her visit to her dying son in Louisiana. Even in this chapter, Taylor is far more interested in discussing the general conditions of life under Jim Crow and Southern lynch law, and railing against them, than she is in depicting herself as a grieving mother. We might ask why Taylor eschews the tools of domestic fiction and the power of sentiment that were available to her in this

period of autobiographical writing. Why *not* position oneself as mother to the nation (the nation within the nation)? Taylor comes close when she insists on referring to the soldiers of the 33rd Regiment as “our boys,” but in doing so she does not so much gender her beneficence as place herself on the same footing as the black and white male officers governing the regiment (64). Some may see in her rejection of a more novelistic format for her life story the hand of inexperience but, given a context in which professional historical writers were also beginning to eschew such conventions, I see a deliberate, and strategic, choice. The result of her avoidance of sentimental tropes is a public document with the ring of truth – a document that reads like history, not like fiction.

Only recently has *Reminiscences* moved from its position as an interesting, but obscure and relatively limited primary source of the Civil War, to a valuable example of turn-of-the-century black female autobiography that sits alongside the works of writers such as Fannie Barrier Williams and Frances Watkins Harper. But, this assignation seems awkward, as we have seen, for Taylor’s work bears none of the traces of the sentimentality that is said to characterize women’s fiction as well as non-fiction in this period.<sup>12</sup> Much of this decision may come down to a question of audience. Taylor does not have to parade her victimized female body before her reader because she is not trying to motivate white women to act on the grounds of the violation of true womanhood. Similarly, we do not find the narrator of *Reminiscences* apologetic for violating such tenets by putting herself before the public as a woman. Though Taylor does speak directly to the reader, there is no “gentle reader” that Susie King Taylor curtsies before. Instead, as Stover puts it, Taylor forcefully “guides her readers, rather than letting them guide her, picking and choosing the appropriate tone according to the impression she wants to make on them” (Stover 206). Carla Peterson, in *Doers of the Word*, observes a strong hand guiding the reader in black women’s oral and written work generally. “As these black women narrated their thoughts and experiences,” she explains,

the location and perspective of the narrating *I* in relation to that which is narrated gained particular importance as evidenced by their careful manipulation of point of view, thus demanding from us a critical consideration of genre. Indeed, for these women the question of genre was not so much a choice of literary convention as an epistemological issue: how to represent the relationship of the self to the self and the Other. (Peterson 23)

By highlighting the greater tension surrounding the ‘narrating I’ (another way of putting this might be ‘the apparently autobiographical narrator’) in black women’s autobiographical writing, Peterson points to the central challenge Taylor faced in writing her history of the war: how to pose an autobiographical narrator that is not reduced by the presumed racial and gendered limitations that conventionally govern a black woman’s authority over public matters. Like Peterson, I see Taylor successfully detaching her first-

person narration from the ontological limits of race and gender subalterity by insisting on a formal relationship between herself and her subject matter, locating her perspective as a ‘narrating I’ to “that which is narrated” in such a way as to command more than control over her personal experience of the events she relates. Taylor’s work is not impersonal – we have seen how she begins her tale with her own family’s history – but it is not personal in the way that slave narratives, or sentimental fiction for that matter, often were. The result is that *Reminiscences* is less a story of one woman’s emancipation than it is a history of emancipation itself with all that presaged it and complicates its fruition in an era of Jim Crow. The text’s ability to impart knowledge is dependent in part upon the degree to which Taylor avoids a ‘storytelling’ mode and adopts a detached voice, that is a more persuasive ‘narrating I,’ able to navigate the ambiguities of the relationship between historical experience and interpretation.

Grouping Taylor with the autobiographical writings of black male writers at the turn of the century is less common but may be considered valid at least in as much as these memoirists shared with Taylor her generation’s outrage at Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction policies as well as her repudiation of domestic plotlines and sentimental imagery. Such a comparison awaits fuller treatment in another study. Yet it bears noting here that *Reminiscences* does not take up the issues that preoccupied black male memoirists in this period. It does not betray, for instance, any trace of the kind of class tension between ‘the folk’ and middle-class blacks, nor does it take a side in arguments over the advocacy of vocational education versus academic pursuits that many critics believe motivated Washington and Dubois to write and animated the public dialogues that they provoked (Wintz). Taylor’s avoidance of polarizing class divisions appears to me to be part of her overall refusal to employ dichotomizing rhetorical gestures – including gestures that reinstate gender. Reflecting the both/and posture of womanism identified by Elsa Barkley Brown, Taylor establishes her ‘narrating I’ as belonging to a woman yet in no way allows her gender assignment to restrict her vision (Brown 1990). She immediately confronts her reader with the fact of her gender but nonetheless refuses to be eliminated from the subject position as a knower because of it. Taylor’s work seems to fit in with no one set of writings, whether ‘male’ or ‘female’ in character, and she refuses to be swept up in masculine-dominated debates as well as feminine modalities. Instead, her work seems to pivot around several genres and employ multiple modes of representation at once. Principal among these strategies that permit an objective, bird’s eye view, as well as a ground-level perspective, on the war is the subjectifying presence of the traveller that hovers about Taylor as narrator.

### **Travel and the Establishment of Authority in Taylor’s Historical Writing**

Travel is a particular sore point for Taylor, as it was for all black people at the turn of

the century inasmuch as black desire for a freedom both symbolized and literalized by mobility increasingly clashed with segregationist institutions and policies. While travel itself signalled a certain degree of freedom, travel writing's attribution of autonomy and self-mastery to its narrator asserted this freedom discursively. The historical narrator portrayed as time traveller may have appealed to Taylor for reasons of gender as well. Arguably, the most powerful form of public writing that nineteenth-century women – locked out of most forms of scientific or official academic writing about the past – could turn to in their desire to write non-fiction was the travel narrative (Smith 2001). While I do not claim that *Reminiscences* literally qualifies as a work of travel literature, travel writing most closely approximates the *authorial position* Taylor assumes in her memoir. In other words, it comprises the category of writing that I find *Reminiscences* most closely resembles, in terms of its construction of a 'narrating I.'

Travel as a metaphor for freedom and as the act that literally and essentially signals freedom under slavery makes the subject of travel overdetermined in African-American writing. Mary G. Mason, for instance, sees travel as a necessary foundation for black women's nineteenth-century autobiographical narratives, whether those narratives told the story of slaves freeing themselves by fleeing north or chronicled the journeys of itinerant preachers, such as Sojourner Truth, who claimed religious authority as spiritually enlightened messengers. Indeed, Mason contends that all of black women's autobiography involved travel, both metaphorically conceived as well as literally experienced (Mason 1990, 340). I find Mason's view of black women's autobiography as travel narrations organized in relation to political debate and oriented towards social causes persuasive, but she does not take this model far enough when she considers the memoir of Susie King Taylor.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, if *Reminiscences* fails to resemble most slave narratives in ways other than its white sponsorship, it more closely follows the conventions of this other popular form of authorship. This is true even on a literal level – for every phase of Taylor's narration is concerned with travel. Even the opening chapters that describe her early childhood centre on trips to her grandmother's or mother's residences. The bulk of the narrative is principally about moving with the 33rd Regiment during the war, and the final chapters, when she travels south to visit her dying son, return to the subject of travel in order to take up the issue of Jim Crow segregation on trains. To be sure, situating Taylor's writing in the context of nineteenth-century travel narratives, rather than labelling it an anomaly among slave narratives or a sketchy war memoir, is not a matter of *mere* literality. Taylor sets up a 'narrating I' as conduit or 'eye' for the reader into spaces and events that are unavailable except through the mediation of the traveller as guide and interpreter.

Taylor not only relies upon travel topically, she uses travel as a means to convey significance and as a trope to impart her most evocative memories. Invariably, Taylor's



earliest and most significant childhood memories, her experiences during the war and the trials she experienced as a mature adult facing loss and dislocation, are enveloped within a narrative of movement. The trip from the Grest plantation to her grandmother's home in Savannah, recounted in the first few pages of *Reminiscences*, is related with special care. We are meant to ascribe metaphorical importance to this first journey, as it was under her grandmother's tutelage that Taylor gained literacy as well as the urban sophistication that set her apart from nearly all of those who escaped to St. Simons Island in the spring of 1862.<sup>14</sup> The emancipatory significance of this journey is flagged by the note of wistfulness that Taylor permits to creep into her retelling of it – a wistfulness and sentimental tone she otherwise eschews in her writing.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, another rare moment of tenderness accompanies Taylor's memory of her 1888 steamship journey to visit her grandmother one last time before her death (27). Nostalgia is not the only sentiment worth marking by way of travel, however; so is outrage. Enroute, via Union gunboat, to St. Simons Island and freedom, Taylor recalls an incident that presents her with an opportunity to slip in a subtle reference to one of slavery's greatest abominations. Taylor describes the Yankee ship's captain's refusal to accommodate the demands of slave master Edward Donegall that two of his slaves, Nick and Judith, who were also his children, be remanded to him (34). Taylor offers this detail as a reminder to the reader that Southern white men often fathered children by slave women and kept – in fact, fought a war to keep – them as their slaves. The narration of an event that does not include Taylor as an actor and also does not end with victimization points to the power of her travel frame: by taking the focus off her own experiences and instead acting as guide to a landscape outside of herself, she provides the panoramic and critical view of the historian, rather than the interior view of the protagonist of her own story (Andrews 24).

The literal travels that provide the narrative structure of *Reminiscences* also suggest the pervasive psychological preoccupation with mobility of the newly freed slave. The dual properties of travel as both liberating and dangerous are expressed in a short passage concerning the threat of so-called repatriation to Liberia. Here, Taylor expresses a preference for Africa over a return to slavery in Georgia but also revels in the joys of a free life on St. Simons Island, where there were “a number of settlements [...] just like little villages, and we would go from one to the other on business, to call, or only for a walk” (38). Mere perambulation at will is presented as a joyful act signalling liberty. Yet, in addition to her most fond memories, her most harrowing recollections also principally feature perambulation gone awry. In the first half of *Reminiscences*, we see her take a walk between Seabrooke and Camp Saxton, become exhausted due to a miscalculation of the distance, get stuck overnight en route, and have to survive in the woods much like she might have were she a fugitive (50-52). At several points in the second half of the text, Taylor draws our attention to other adventures involving travel from one point to the next, several at sea, each instance of which is relayed with greater detail than is usual

throughout the rest of the text. These instances include a blizzard that nearly waylays her trip south to see her grandmother one last time before her death in 1888 (27), the capsizing of the riverboat upon which she travelled (97-99), and a collision between the steamer upon which she travelled and another, which caused a fiery crash that killed many of Taylor's shipmates (129-30). Such moments of mobility and travel infuse drama into Taylor's writing and provide scaffolding for her authorial voice.

Taylor's sense of place, and the importance she attributes to the precise location of her travels, also recalls the conventions of travel literature. *Reminiscences* attends to the question *where* just as consistently as *when* when the narrator tells us, for instance, that her great-great-grandmother was from Virginia (25), when she is very specific about her birthplace at Grest Farm, "which was on an island known as the Isle of Wight, Liberty County, about 35 miles from Savannah, Georgia" (26), when she supplies the street names for the stables for the horses of the coach that conveyed her to Savannah (26), and when she locates for us the precise spot upon which she learned to read – "Bay Lane, [b]etween Habersham and Price Streets, about a half a mile from my house" (29). With great attention to spatial dimensions, Taylor directs readers to follow her directly into the scene of her lessons: "we went in, one at a time, through the gate, into the yard to the L kitchen, which was the schoolroom" (29). Maintaining our sense of movement through space, she then leads us out again: "After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to a square, about a block from the school, and wait for each other" (30). The past, in Taylor's telling of it, is both spatial and dynamic. The metaphor of travel establishes a guide-tourist relationship between author and reader that situates Taylor, again, as an authority on the socio-political landscape, rather than simply relating her own individual experience of it.

The titles of Taylor's middle chapters often prominently announce place names that correlate with the topics and events covered in the section so that, similar to nineteenth-century travel writing, the topographical journey parallels the chronology of her story: "On St. Simon's Island, 1862," "Camp Saxton – Proclamation and Barbecue, 1863," "On Morris and Other Islands." Even when titles do not specifically identify geographic space in chapters such as "Military Expeditions and Life in Camp," the overarching concern of Taylor is to describe the perils and challenges of journeying with the 33rd Regiment as it engaged the rebel forces that fled each town and garrison along the way. The "we" of *Reminiscences* in these chapters is composed, naturally, of herself and the soldiers and officers of the 33rd, but this first-person plural also conveys us easily from one battle scene to another: "We were ordered" (55), "we remained here a few weeks longer" (58), "we arrived at Seabrooke" (58), "we landed on Morris Island" (88). Even when she herself is stationary, Taylor describes actions taken by the 33rd Regiment on its expeditions as movement: "into Darien, Georgia, and up the Ridge, and on January 23,

1863, another up St. Mary's River" (55). Just as Taylor permits us to accompany her into the home that served as her schoolhouse before the war, during the war we are escorted by our narrator from place to place and event to event of the Civil War. Of course, the whole last chapter, "A Visit to Louisiana," is in the form of a trip back to the South (145-52). In it, Taylor once again narrates for her reader the cultural and political terrain of the South in the form of travel writing in such a way as to convey her most piercing analyses of the Jim Crow era as well as her most deeply held convictions about the need for racial justice throughout the nation.

Taylor could have chosen other autobiographical formats, such as domestic fiction. She could have positioned her 'narrating I' as the tragic heroine who sacrifices domestic happiness for the good of the nation or sacrifices her own happiness for the good of her husband and children. If her target audience had been the middle-class antebellum women that made up such an important readership for abolition literature a half century before, perhaps she would have assumed the posture of the beleaguered heroine-survivor of the slave narrative. But, neither narrator persona suited her purposes. I explain this as a consequence of her ambition to tackle the most contentious topic of the century – the Civil War. The public and historical nature of the primary focal point for her narrative demanded a more authoritative modality. Travel as a genre of literature afforded her an authorial presence that other autobiographical formats could not. In surveying her options and refusing the sentimentality associated with women's domestic fiction, Taylor reached for a mode of writing that suited the iconic nature and national scope of her subject matter. Taylor used the genre of travel writing to establish a subject position that enabled and authorized her to narrate the historical past in a way that permitted her to comment on what was the most contentious event in US history up to that point.

The travel narrative is a form of adventure story; its protagonist is a hero merely for the fact of having undergone noteworthy experiences and recording them for others to experience as well. But it is also a genre that provides a political platform for that protagonist to launch an interpretive commentary. Slave narratives and domestic fiction do not point very far beyond the hero/victim of the adventures; even in the explicitly abolitionist slave memoirs, the didactic passages are expressed in fairly tempered terms, in what seems to be a careful marketing ploy to avoid offending a white audience, even a sympathetic one. William Andrews cites even so widely credited and credible a slave narrative author as Frederick Douglass as reporting that his "well-meaning [white] associates urged him "to pin [himself] down to [his] simple narrative of the facts of his life when he spoke for the cause of freedom" (Andrews 24). Such an insistence on the limitations of a first-person narrator in the reception of slave narratives can be contrasted with the empowering properties of the travel narrator whose 'eye' serves as a prosthetic interpretative organ that contains the power to judge as well as to see. Consider the

degree to which experience is alchemically turned into knowledge in traditional travel writing when it is practised by white male authors. Mary Louise Pratt, as well as a host of other feminist critics and post-colonial critics, has analyzed the empowered subject position created by the genre of travel writing, particularly in the nineteenth century, to show that the 'imperial eye' it offered was one wielded by women as well as men to similar ends (Pratt). Seeking a foundation for her authority over interpretations of the Civil War, Taylor could not have hit upon a more effective mode of writing.

*Reminiscences* begins not with the war itself, as I note earlier, but with a chapter entitled "A Brief Sketch of My Ancestors," in which Taylor proudly recounts the longevity and maternal fruitfulness enjoyed by her foremothers (25-27). Throughout the chapters that follow, Taylor moves back and forth between particular memories of harrowing experiences in which she was the centre and issues of great import and general interest to students of the war, including black soldiers' recruitment and pay, Confederate hostility, the reception of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, camp conditions, attitudes among the recruits towards literacy, relations between enlisted men and officers, the pressures of nursing maimed and dying men apart from medical facilities and with virtually no supplies at hand, negotiations between Union and Confederate armies, and the financial devastation caused by the failure of the Freedman's Savings Bank after the war. In a final chapter on the war titled "Mustered Out," Taylor directly addresses her black readers as "my dear friends" and poses the the challenging question, "do we understand the meaning of the war?" (118-19). She answers the question for them in the negative: "No, we do not, only those brave soldiers, and those who had occasion to be in it, can realize what it was" (119). If it were only the experiential nature of the war that Taylor claimed for herself, her narrative may have ended there. An additional four chapters round out *Reminiscences* and make clear that Taylor saw her authority as a producer of knowledge based upon, but not bounded by, her personal experience of war. In the chapters "After the War," "The Women's Relief Corps," "Thoughts on Present Conditions," and "A Visit to Louisiana," Taylor presents an analysis of the failure of Reconstruction and the national government's failure to adequately reward or address the needs of black veterans and their families, and she chafes especially at the conditions under which respectable black women travelled when visiting the South in the 1880s and '90s. As these chapters make clear, Taylor's narrative is not a "single-experience" autobiography, as some have termed, for nearly half of its chapters encompass other topics and periods of Taylor's life (Mason, 1980; Bloom 1987). Nor is it a slave narrative. It is not an exposé or argument against slavery, and it was not written by a slave or even a recently freed slave. Neither is it a "straightforward chronicle of events" written by a child without a sense of the larger issues at stake beyond her personal experience. It is better viewed as a travel narrative written by an author struggling within the multiple traditions of black women's autobiography in the nineteenth century to

produce a politically engaged essay that is authorized by experiences under slavery and in war to claim the power and position of historical arbiter and interpreter of race relations and political struggle in its own contemporary moment. Forcing Taylor into the role of slave or child (or even a passive witness), as does so much of the early writing about Taylor's narrative, is tantamount to reducing a subject to a role. It is my intent, by positioning her text as travel writing, to break out of the tendency among critics, particularly introducers and commentators, to look *at* Susie King Taylor rather than to look *in the same direction* as her. This shift repositions Taylor as a subject in a way that makes her voice heard, and the view of her body is eclipsed by that of the terrain she intends to illuminate.

### **Witness in the Court of History**

Despite the stance of traveller-hero that I see Susie King Taylor adopting in *Reminiscences*, the shift in readerly perspective that I am suggesting is not guaranteed by the strategies Taylor employed in her writing. Readers may read against genre when compelled by a politicized (racialized and gendered) sense of what genuine authorship comprises. Designating *Reminiscences* as travel literature may not by itself serve to reproduce Susie King Taylor as the subject of her own narrative. In fact, it will not do so as long as we insist that her subalterity trumps her subjective voice.

As Mario Cesareo has noted in his work on the slave narrative of Mary Prince, when the subaltern travels, or writes about travel, the reverse of subjectification can occur. Rather than producing a narrative of travel that purports to interpret the (political or literal) landscape through which the author passes, Cesareo explains how the subaltern author is often herself rendered as spectacularized landscape. Readers deny the subaltern travel-writer subjecthood by understanding her knowledge as experience, rather than permitting her experience to be rendered into knowledge. "Legitimation resides outside the authority of the Other," Cesareo argues, and is crystallized in the dialectic between the Other's testimony and the annotation framing the text (Cesareo 115). In other words, the white sponsorship that presumes to authorize the subaltern author may act to reinstate her as "that which is traveled upon" (Cesareo 117).

Colonel Higginson's glowing endorsement of Taylor as "very exceptional among the coloured laundresses in that she could read and write and [...] [in that] her whole life and career were most estimable" is more than a simple backward compliment that reflects the prejudices of the moment that Higginson hoped to countermand. In the antebellum period, such couching may have been imperative for the promotion of the text as truth telling. In 1902, it meant the official stamp of white, male, and military approval of Taylor's interpretation of the war. But one must also recognize (as many historians and

literary critics have) the degree to which this framing renders Taylor's testimony simultaneously devoid of meaning in a kind of epistemological conundrum. The framing of Taylor's experience within Higginson's authorization sets up a subject position outside Taylor's text from which to view her as spectacle, one that readers are encouraged to identify with and one that denies Taylor the subject position as the 'eye' or 'narrating I' that can evaluate as well as look. Recall that Higginson endorsed Taylor's memoir as an "unembellished" and "plain record" of "a simple life" but also of "peculiar interest" for its "woman's point of view." But what is the value of having a particularized point of view, when History is imagined as a view onto events emanating from no particular place? Higginson, and later Rose, establishes himself as able to inhabit this no-place from which the importance and truth of History can be discerned, relegating Taylor to an embodied presence within the history-scape that only he – or *we*, inasmuch as the reader of *Reminiscences* is invited by Rose to imagine ourselves as situated above Taylor's viewpoint – can perceive. Harkening back to Gayatri Spivak's ground-breaking analysis of subalterity, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Cesareo's views such white authentication as Higginson's as destabilizing the subaltern travel text, in fact excluding it from the subjectifying genre of travel writing by rendering it an anomalous text of travel devoid of a reliable traveller-narrator. He goes on to explain that it is the radical otherness established by the white endorsement framing a subaltern text that

renders [the slave or subaltern's] speech-act not a conversation (even when addressed to the One) but a confession, a deposition, an unveiling to be paraded in front of the Same's critical gaze; her utterance will not be answered. It will be circulated among a dialoguing community that excludes her and that will either corroborate or deny it. (Cesareo 115)

As a witness, Susie King Taylor is too closely associated with the event she relates to enter into a true dialogue or be trusted to produce new, otherwise uncorroborated knowledge. Cesareo explains further that, despite the subaltern's reach for travel writing as a subjectifying genre, strategies of reading triggered by white authenticating gestures such as Higginson's ensure that the subaltern author's insights and revelations will not be accepted as "discoveries but recognizances, reaffirmations of an already existing knowledge." In this sense, Cesareo continues, "her discourse does not produce knowledge, new paradigms, but information, to be freely circulated in the rearrangement of diverse positions within an already determined field of knowledge" (Cesareo 117). *Reminiscences* has long circulated within the inappropriately assigned category of slave narrative, and, more than that, it has long been viewed as spectacularized testimony that is incapable of conveying original insight or assigning meaning to the events it gives a view onto.

My essay has taken up the problem of how Susie King Taylor has been silenced by the very people wishing to draw attention to her (Higginson, Rose, and those literary scholars who tend to view *Reminiscences* either as an anachronistic slave narrative written by an uncomprehending child, a poorly written unsentimental female memoir, or a dissatisfyingly impersonal autobiography). I feel these readings paradoxically substitute Taylor's perspective and historical analysis with a view of the author as a subaltern curiosity; for they thereby re-inscribe her as a subaltern in ways that preclude dialogue with her as author for the reasons Cesareo lays out above. Rather than an *eyewitness*, such discursive positioning likens Taylor to a *material witness* – someone whose testimony is desired but whose judgment is suspected as being overly linked with the event -- even to the point of being tarnished by his or her involvement in that event. Just as Rose assumes the reader of *Reminiscences* knows more about the Civil War than Taylor, the author of it, does, no new knowledge can come from a material witness – only confirmation of what we, the prosecutors of history, already know. Like the observations of Nancy Prince on slavery and commerce in the early nineteenth century that concern Cesareo, Taylor's memory of the Civil War and judgments of its aftermath are 'circulated' as "recognizances, reaffirmations of an already existing knowledge"; her discourse is not allowed to "produce knowledge, new paradigms," but only to "circulate [...] within an already determined field of knowledge." It is my hope that, by choosing to view *Reminiscences* through the lens of travel writing, rather than as an anomalous slave narrative or dissatisfying sentimental memoir, we can see that Taylor's autobiography produces not simply a look back, but also a looking forward – what Cesareo calls "an ongoing, evolving present" (Cesareo 117). Should we choose to hear Taylor, the "'phenomenology' of her 'travelling,'" we would take her "lived experience as a function of [her] subjectivity as it unfolds: it would be the slave doing the talking, viewing, reacting, and not her remnant, the converted freedwoman reminiscing" (Cesareo 117).

Perhaps one key to thinking through the epistemological conundrum posed by this subaltern history of the war lies in our grasp of the word *witness*. In one sense, the sense that I think both Higginson and Rose have cast upon Taylor's text, Taylor's witnessing of the Civil War becomes a way to render her knowledge a matter of spectacularized experience that is subject to and in need of interpretation. The sponsor of Taylor's text, Colonel Higginson, presents Taylor's act of witnessing as static and non-interpretive so as to counteract the assumption that, as a black woman, she would not have useful knowledge about the nation's history to impart. Ironically perhaps, this endorsement situates Taylor as an inert recording device, denying her the role of the war's historical interpreter and commentator on present-day realities. Taylor's own writing actively resists this assignation by presenting its author as more than a suspect and overly involved material witness and refusing the easy relegation of its narrator's perspective; instead, it elevates her work to the level of interpretation and analysis.

Placed in the proper context, Taylor's act of witnessing takes on a different, and more subjectified, meaning than material witness or even eyewitness would have. In the tradition of black Americans' lives and activism, 'witnessing' meant confronting and truth telling, in the sense of choosing to affirm this truth and not that one. Joanne Braxton credits the success of nineteenth-century black women's spiritual autobiographies to the subjectifying effects of African-American witnessing and testifying in religious contexts (Braxton 49-50). A more expansive definition that goes to the heart of Taylor's assumption of the role of historical witness is that offered by linguist Geneva Smitherman who defines testifying as telling

the truth through story [...]. [N]ot plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences [...], testifying challenges racist assumptions and provides examples others can identify with and emulate. (qtd. in Fulton xi, 13)

The construction of an effective narrative authorizes what I have been calling a 'narrating I' to render judgment and not just convey impressions. This sense of witnessing refuses the either/or of the dichotomy imposed upon experience and interpretation. Taylor's taking up of this position permits her knowledge of the Civil War and the contemporary moment to stand as grounded in experience in a way that authorizes her to speak about history without being reduced to that experience or unable to assign it meaning for others.

At the same time, African-American witnessing should not be essentialized as having a static connotation. The kind of witnessing available to Taylor at the turn of the century is ontologically different than the sort of meaning that witnessing took during the era of slavery. Taylor does not present herself as a supplicant; nor does she provide bodily evidence of injustice as so many scarred and terrorized escapees from slavery did earlier in the century. Taylor assumes a position of authority on the past and on the present, as much as it is a consequence of past struggles that were won. Taylor's witnessing transforms her into what Shoshana Felman, recalling Holocaust survivor literature, terms a "witness of the other witnesses" (Felman 110). By this, I think Felman means to convey a certain passage of time that provides the "witness of the other witnesses" with a vantage point from which to not only recount but also to analyze historically the summation of experiences that one's own experience stands for and represents. This type of witnessing refuses to be dismissed on the basis of one's closeness to one's subject matter or authorized purely on that same basis. The desire to advocate for others, the passage of time between event and recounting, and the accumulation of insight, knowledge, and perspective turns experience into authentic knowledge or personal memory into History.



With her adoption of some of the strategies of the travel writer, Susie King Taylor goes far in trying to force her narrative out of female-specific, or slave-specific, inertness without repudiating her personal past, without ventriloquating masculine authority or denying gender its reality in her life. It is up to her present and future readers whether this text will be given its due as both historical analysis and eyewitness account or whether we will insist on an either/or of subjective experience and interpretative authority that relegates Susie King Taylor perpetually to the neither/nor of the material witness who is unable to give expert testimony in the court that is History.

### **Afterword: Travelling with Susie King Taylor**

The practices of American slavery present a useful metaphor for my reading of *Reminiscences* as travel literature, one that may help us think through our role as and, hopefully, extricate our reading from the ontological traps of race and gender that, at times, have served to stifle this text. Early in her narrative, Taylor reminds us of one of the most ubiquitous indignities of slavery – the travel pass. Permission to travel from a white master was often required of black persons on the open road. “I often wrote passes for my grandmother, for all coloured persons, free or slaves, were compelled to have a pass,” Taylor explains, with that clipped tone she often reserved for the recounting of slavery’s outrages. “Every person,” she remembers bitterly

had to have this pass, for at nine o’clock each night a bell was rung, and any coloured persons found on the street after this hour were arrested by the watchman, and put in the guardhouse until next morning, when their owners would pay their fines and then release them. (31)

There were, however, breaks in this system of surveillance and detainment. “I knew a number of persons,” Taylor continues,

who went out at any time at night and were never arrested, as the watchman who knew them so well he never stopped them, and seldom asked to see their passes, only stopping them long enough, sometimes, to say “Howdy,” and then telling them to go along. (31)

The critic stands in much the same space of authorizing power as the watchman described in this passage. Certainly, as readers, we wish to greet the author of *Reminiscences*, but when does that greeting become tantamount to a demand that she produce for us the travel pass that qualifies her as the subject of her own story? How has our misplaced greeting of her as a narrating slave or woman delayed her, waylaid her journey, imprisoned her within our readerly gaze? I have argued that viewing Taylor’s autobiography as travel narrative, rather than as an anomalous slave narrative, failed sentimental female memoir, or wholly singular text is a useful step towards our appreciation of Taylor’s intentions and her accomplishment. A crucial component of this

process of re-reading entails retraining the reader's from viewing Taylor with a gaze that reifies her as subaltern – so that we might succeed in looking not just at Taylor but to the historical horizon where she is pointing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Citations of *Reminiscences* will be made in text and refer to the 1988 Marcus Wiener edition entitled *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs*.

<sup>2</sup> Although David Blight does not specifically discuss Susie King Taylor's interventions in the public debates on the memorialization of the Civil War, he elaborates upon the general significance of such debates in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Belknap Press, 2002). See also Drew Faust's essay "'We Should Grow Too Fond of It': Why We Love the Civil War" *Civil War History* 50 (December 2004): 368-84.

<sup>3</sup> Higginson likely felt a need to clarify that Susie King Taylor was a respectable married woman since black women, and more pointedly women accompanying military regiments, suffered from public scorn and assumptions of licentiousness. For more on black women as "contraband" and camp followers during the Civil War, see Thavolia Glymph, "'This Species of Property': Female Slave Contrabands in the Civil War," in Edward D. C. Campbell and Kym S. Rice, eds., *A Woman's War* (University Press of Virginia, 1996), 55-71. See also Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days Amongst the Contraband* (Arno Press, 1968). The most thorough work on the burden of proof placed on black women and the strategies they employed to navigate the "politics of respectability" in this time period is that of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> The phrase 'overly exceptionalize,' is mine, but the notion of a gesture whereby the accomplishment of a subaltern is reduced to that of a "circus trick" (and thus serves to uphold the generalization rather than interrupt) it is best articulated, and academic criticism regarding subalterity problematized, by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois, 1988), 271-315. On the specific problematics of white scholars' interpretation and appropriation of black women's writing, see Lisa Long, *White Scholars, African American Texts* (Rutgers University Press, 2005); and also Ann duCille's trenchant discussion in "The Occult of Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies" *Signs* 19/3 (Spring 1994): 591-629.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is in an acknowledgement of the complexity of Taylor's life *as lived*, Rose renders ironic Higginson's use of the term 'simple' by stating that the "simplicity of Mrs. King's life,

however, is simple only as the world in its simplicity judges these matters" - Rose herself attributes a childlike simplicity to Taylor's *narration* of her life throughout her introduction.

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking here of the insights of many black female theorists, principally Elsa Barkley Brown, who usefully employed the notion of both/and in her essay "Womanist Consciousness" (Brown 631-32) and Patricia Hill Collins who provides an extension discussion of this concept in her work (Collins 221-238). DoVeanna S. Fulton has most recently deployed a similar concept, asserting that an "essential element of African American culture has been a "both/and worldview that allows the simultaneous existence of theory and practice [...]" (Fulton 11-12). See also Joanne M. Braxton's a discussion of the dangers that either/or thinking in scholarly criticism poses to an appreciation of black women's writing (Braxton 18).

<sup>7</sup> Frances Smith Foster in "Autobiography after Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley" observes how the Civil War memoirist Elizabeth Keckley similarly rejects being defined by a "static definition as 'slave' or even 'former slave'" in her writing (45). Frances Smith Foster, "Autobiography after Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley," in James Robert Payne, ed., *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives* (University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 32-63.

<sup>8</sup> Frances Smith Foster not only takes issue with the radical singularity attributed to Keckley's Civil War memoir in ways that reflect my own thinking about the distinctiveness of *Reminiscences*, she also views Keckley's narrator as similar to Taylor's in that both narrators refuse to allow themselves to be discussed as ex-chattel.

<sup>9</sup> Johnnie M. Stover also finds a good deal of anger in Taylor's narrative, noting that "her gaze is more confrontational" than that of other black female autobiographers (Stover 13). While I hear abundant outrage running through nearly every chapter of *Reminiscences*, I would not label Taylor's outrage as essentially maternal in character, as does Braxton (48).

<sup>10</sup> Stover likewise sees strategies of "subtle resistance" in Taylor's writing and includes among the list of those strategies her "use of silence, disguise, concealment, dissembling" and also "the act of shifting point of view, that is, sprinkling the narrative with instances where the autobiographer speaks out from her text by making remarks directly to the reader in the form of general comments or rhetorical questions" (122-24).

<sup>11</sup> Jane Schultz notes that black nurses have been doubly invisible even in "works commemorating women's war achievements," particularly those published at the turn of the century that not only "reproduced the sectional divide" but also tended to obliterate the memory of people of colour generally (215).

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Tate, in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Texts at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford University Press, 1992), provides a thorough and insightful discussion of the operations of sentiment within black women's writing in this period.

<sup>13</sup> Stover comments that she, too, sees Taylor's text as written in ways that approximate what she calls an 'adventure' narrative (205).

<sup>14</sup> When Captain Whitmore, commander of the gunboat that ferried Taylor and others to the island, expressed puzzlement regarding Taylor's literacy, Taylor reports explaining the difference between her (as well as her future husband, Edward King) and the other escaping slaves as a consequence of her move to her grandmother's, noting that illiterate former slaves had been "reared in the country and I in the city" (34).

<sup>15</sup> One of the only fond portraits we get of non-military figures, apart from her grandmother, is that of the stagecoach driver who transported Taylor to her grandmother in the city, a man with a

long beard who Taylor mentions (for no other apparent reason than to humanize him). His name was Shakespeare (26).

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