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In public discourses about American life and culture, the contributions of African American women have not yet been fully acknowledged, accredited, or valued, especially in terms of their participation in sociopolitical advocacy and action, their expertise and innovation, or their leadership. Although their stories are being increasingly documented in various arenas, these women's lives and achievements are still typically unknown to the general public. With precious few exceptions they are not incorporated into public lore concerning heroes, legends, and leaders. They are also not regularly included in the core curricula of schools as preparation for an educated citizenry.

One noticeable exception is that their accomplishments have been gaining some vibrancy recently in limited ways. For example, during women's history month or African American history month, there are now highlights in social media of high-achieving individual women in various work arenas. Barbie dolls have been created in celebration of women such as Maya Angelou, Ella Fitzgerald, Michelle Obama, Rosa Parks, Ida B. Wells, and more. In

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colleges and universities, there is now an extended range of specially focused elective courses, and occasionally, at all educational levels, there are opportunities for extracurricular and often extra credit community engagement assignments. Occasionally also, there is the spectacle and surprise of popular media films such as *Harriet* (about Harriet Tubman), or *Hidden Figures* (about three African American women at NASA who were pioneers in science and technology), or *The United States vs Billie Holiday* (about the iconic jazz singer), or the Netflix series *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madame C. J. Walker* (the remarkable entrepreneur who was the first African American woman to become a millionaire), or the CNN documentary on Rosa Parks (the civil rights activist who was more than just a tired woman who sat down on a Montgomery bus).

Although this increase in visibility is certainly noteworthy, the stories of African American women quite often do not garner the spotlight or even legibility in the narratives that are regarded as officially meaningful to the society as a whole or consequential in national enterprises. These accounts are positioned as marginal to the center of the American story, part of the backdrop against which other accounts deemed more significant in national schema are told. Or, when there is a spotlighting of their work, the women are regularly presented, whether in curricula or popular culture, as exceptional or extraordinary examples rather than as part of well-grounded and laudable patterns of expertise and achievement that should be more explicitly appreciated. My intention in this volume is to participate in shifting this paradigm.

A significant lever for change has been the effort of an array of researchers both academic and public to document the lives and work of African American women over time. The persistent flow of scholarship produced by these researchers over the last half century or more is indeed noteworthy and crosses multiple disciplines, especially in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. From this diverse body of work, we now have more documentation of the many roads taken by African American women toward advocacy, activism, and leadership, and a clearer explication of the contexts and conditions surrounding their contributions and achievements. Included in this oeuvre is African American women's participation in civic discourses and sociopolitical activities with focus on the levels of their engagement in the actual development of their communities and in the building of our new world nation.

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Within this scholarly effort, my desire to shift conceptual paradigms suggests a presumption. The efforts of African American women to participate in managing their own lives and in working with others to build and sustain the nation have been in motion from the beginning of their presence in North America—from 1619 (the year currently identified as the original moment of their migration to North America, involuntary though this process may have been for most) through the current era. The scholarly challenge in operationalizing this presumption is to have enough imagination and fortitude to search for evidence from wherever it may be located and to extend the scope of analysis and interpretation to account for these data, whether quantitative or qualitative, with respect and regard.

A frequently used analytical approach with this type of research and scholarship has been based on a feminist rhetorical framework, as is the case in this volume. With specific attention to explorations of sociopolitical engagement, I am using a multi-lensed theoretical and analytical viewpoint to examine the writing, rhetorical performances, and operational patterns of women in context. As is typical with this approach, I focus particularly on intersections of gender, race, culture, class, power, and place, exploring the women's uses of language in various communities, work arenas, societal events, and social movements. My central priorities have been to bring a more fully rendered sociohistorical texture to the rhetorical actions of individuals and cohorts in social, public, and institutional space; to take into account their standpoints as a particular set of stakeholders within community-building and nation-building processes; and to make clearer the impacts and consequences of their actions.

Within this general schema, what feminist rhetorical studies also does (which is not centralized in this volume) is to cast more direct attention not simply toward the analysis and interpretation of gender, race, and power (included here as key factors) but also toward sexuality and power (which is not specifically included). In this latter case, feminist rhetorical studies tends to interrogate questions such as (1) the importance of understanding woman-centered friendships and women's loving relationships with other women as part and parcel of women's identity, voice, and agency; (2) the formation, development, and deployment of societal attitudes, norms, and practices related to sexuality; and (3) the ways in which women's sexual choices, behavior, and relationships

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are often used in social, public, and institutional space to constrain, control, compromise, punish, and marginalize their agency, their authority, and their participation in circles of power and possibility.

Overwhelmingly in the nineteenth century, such concerns were not front and center in women's rhetorical actions and agenda in public but were cloaked in invisibility and silence. Although such concerns were present and relevant for all women during this era, for African American women the obfuscations and silences were even more complex. Everything was exacerbated by several critical challenges, mainly the need to establish themselves as "human," as "ladies," and as worthy of respect, without regard for their race and no matter their class, status, condition, or sexual identity. Unlike their elite white sisters, African American women were not put on pedestals to be adored. In contrast, the sexual and physical abuses they suffered were not considered of critical concern at all in the society generally. Moreover, their sexual desires were deemed wanton, inappropriate, and subject to exploitation by others. In other words, the ways and means of sexuality in women's lives, especially from African American women's own perspectives, were just not put forth front and center by them in public discourses—except to be steadfast about their perceptions of themselves as worthy women, as ladies.

Instead of bringing the specific views of their sexuality into the public sphere, these realities were set aside, ignored, and hidden, and they remained so until the late twentieth century with the rise of Black women's studies as a field of inquiry and the rise of writers such as Audre Lorde who boldly claimed all of herself as an African American woman doing the work she chose to do. In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she states: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been" (Audre Lorde 1984, 40).

In resonance with Lorde's point of view, I assert that the rhetorical legacies of African American women as sociopolitical actors need to be "spoken, made verbal and shared." The pathways for accomplishing this task are complex, however, with multidimensionalities that matter. In facing this complexity, consider Alice Walker's images of African American women's expressiveness in the essay

“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983) with her articulation of an innovative array of expressive outlets that these women have found for themselves historically, including their flower gardens. Incorporating Walker’s viewpoint in this analysis, I realize that one volume really cannot adequately address all dimensions of African American women’s expressiveness that matter. That being so, I focus most directly on one, arguably key, expressive vista—their use of written language in public arenas. My imperative is to listen to what they actually say in order to gain a clearer line of sight from which to interrogate who these women were, what they did, and what the legacies of their lives and work have been.

A signal opportunity in understanding the scope of this study is to underscore the value of extending a special invitation to others to join in the ongoing scholarly effort. In my view, collective action, as this cohort of African American women asserted by their activities, will go farther in making a meaningful difference in knowledge-making and understanding than singular and solitary efforts. The imperative is to add depth, breadth, variety, and texture to the scholarly landscape. The presumption is that moving collectively to fill in gaps in knowledge-making and in the presentation and representation of scholarship—given the various approaches that we might identify and use—has a twofold capacity to push us along the way to a more robust understanding. On one hand, we create sharper lenses through which to appreciate, understand, and respect these women’s lives and work. On the other hand, we generate greater capacity for determining the extent to which their work has participated in the specific priority of advancing the causes of freedom, justice, equality, and empowerment. By such collective commitments the ultimate benefits for our contemporary world become more evident. We gain clarity about the essentially untapped wellspring of African American women’s experiences, expertise, and wisdom in negotiating the ongoing challenges of living and working in a nation that struggles still to honor our bedrock proclamations of freedom, truth, justice, equality, and the pursuit of happiness—for all.

Simply put, then, I have designed this book not to be all-inclusive of everything that constitutes the fullness of African American women’s lives for all times. A single volume just cannot do so. Instead, my design is to take a closer look at a key piece—the women’s rhetorical prowess in specific contexts. The focus and scope of my analysis centers primarily on using the words of African

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American women themselves to track the ways and means of their work as sociopolitical beings in public space over what we call in rhetorical studies the long nineteenth century from the founding of the United States of America in 1776 to the turn of the century in 1900. From this perspective, I have identified three chronological anchor points: (1) the founding of the nation, which I symbolize by acknowledging Phillis Wheatley as an African American woman who fashioned space from which she raised her voice and vision in the cause of freedom even as an enslaved woman; (2) the American Civil War, which marked a monumental shift in horizons for African Americans, including African American women, and for the nation; and (3) the rise of the Black Clubwomen's Movement, as evidence of an evolving intensification of efforts over the full course of the century by African American women leaders to be values added in community development and nation building agenda.

With these three chronological anchor points established, I direct special effort toward respecting the ways in which the women saw themselves as actors and talked about their own lives and work. I have taken care to resist the tendency to cast twenty-first-century conceptual frameworks backward in filtering the women's actions through our contemporary priorities rather than the opposite view of using their words, experiences, and expertise to inform our contemporary thinking. Much to my advantage, this cohort actually did articulate their own visions and raised their own voices from the birth of the nation across the next century. My fundamental task, then, has been to listen, to honor what they articulated for themselves, and then to look forward from their visions and voices in evolutionary ways. It has also been to respect their lives and their work more forthrightly and to incorporate their insights, actions, and legacies more dynamically into our ongoing analytical and interpretive frameworks.

In my examinations of the space between the founding of the nation and the turn of the nineteenth century, my imperative has been to look for root systems; for continuities of concern, patterns of practice, echoes, and resonances over time; for insights and legacies. A basic point of leverage has been to recognize dynamic linkages among issues of race, gender, power, authority, place, and space. With this focus, I acknowledge the problems and challenges that the women experienced as they were fighting for respect and regard as "humans," as "ladies," and most boldly, as agents of change. Certainly, I also acknowledge that there is still much more

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to discover, document, and understand about the fullness of their lives than I am showcasing in this book. Most certainly, just as the patterns of their rhetorical prowess deserve critical attention, so too do other dimensions of their lives (for example, their sexuality, their expertise with art and design, and more) as we continue to draw forward a more richly rendered view of who these women actually were and what they were able to accomplish.

That said, with a specific focus on African American women as task-oriented rhetorical actors in time and place, it becomes clearer that the nineteenth century is a compelling point of interest for tracking and interrogating their patterns and performances. In point of fact, the founding of the nation left much about our national values and identity unresolved, as evidenced most explicitly by the constitutional declaration of a commitment to freedom, justice, equality, and the pursuit of happiness for all while being still a very active slaveholding nation. These discontinuities were loose ends, and they foreshadowed the coming of the American Civil War. This war constituted a critical moment for ongoing national decision-making directed toward clarifying the kind of nation that we were determined to be. As such, the war constituted also fertile ground for African American women's sociopolitical work in helping to make the nation into the place that they wanted and needed to exist.

Identifying the three anchor points (the founding of the nation, the American Civil War, and the rise of the Black Clubwomen's Movement) makes more apparent the viewpoint that for African American women the whole century was metaphorically a "black box" (in fact, a series of them). This metaphor symbolizes the complexities of the gaps between what we know on the surface about African American women and what we do not substantively know about them as fully rendered human beings. The questions are basic. Since African American women were neither mushrooms that simply grew in the dark nor blank slates on which the world was writing, what were the women actually thinking, saying, and doing? What were their interests and concerns? How were they managing to live and survive amid disempowering circumstances or to engage in actions that were not dictated or controlled by power elites? What were the conditions and circumstances that either enabled or hindered their actions? What difference did their thoughts and actions make in the course of human events? How do we shift perspectives so that we enable more visibility (to see them), audibility

(to hear them), and intelligibility (to understand them)? How do we analyze and interpret their lives, work, and achievements with an eye toward creating a respectful and rightful place for them in our narratives of nation, in our national celebrations of heroes, legends, and leaders?

The use of intersectional perspectives of race, class, gender, and culture as well as interrogations of identity, agency, authority, power, sociopolitical hierarchies, systems of entitlement, and so forth have fostered two quite fundamental conclusions. One is that, although African American women were fully present in many communities across the nation during the nineteenth century, their presence was ignored. They were systematically cast in shadow by discriminatory practices related to race, gender, and class, and by the images that had emerged and dominated in the American environment related to their being Black, women, low status politically, and mainly slaves. The women were positioned within this framework as chattel, ignorant, passive, and inconsequential. A second more affirming conclusion, however, is irrefutable. These women were indeed present. From the growing archival evidence, in fact, we can see that they actually had deep stakes in fomenting transformative change, as women of a downtrodden race who were relegated, not by their own choice but via the will and practices of others, to living and working in an overtly inhospitable world.

To be emphasized, therefore, is the point that it is not a stretch to imagine that sociopolitical action mattered to African American women, and likewise, that the outcomes of the Civil War, as a critical national event, mattered specifically in terms of their ongoing desires and claims for freedom, justice, equality, and empowerment. A closer examination of the whole cloth of their advocacy and action over time offers compelling evidence of the multiple ways they found, even during these early decades of the nation, to do their parts, large and small, in the grander enterprise of building a nation where the values on which the nation claimed to stand (truth, freedom, justice, equality, empowerment) would prevail for all, including themselves. In support of these assessments, I have divided the book into three parts to get a better hold of this complex landscape: Visibility, Audibility, Intelligibility. Each part constitutes a lens through which to analyze and interpret the lives and work of this cohort of women.

Starting with Part I, “Visibility,” I acknowledge historically popularized characterizations of African American women as pawns

rather than as players in American life and culture. They have been positioned traditionally as passive participants in the American ecosystem who were only modestly significant, if at all, in the making and shaping of the nation. Basically, they are deemed to be present historically, perhaps, but they are not deemed to be significant as full-bodied corporeal subjects of interest. This view of them came to be institutionalized from 1619 and their first steps on the North American Continent into subsequent decades as policies and practices affirmed this positioning and set expectations and operational frameworks. By 1776 and the Declaration of Independence, African American women were typically designated in the social order as chattel rather than as human beings and as unworthy of acknowledgment and consideration in human enterprises. The analytical imperative, therefore, with visibility as the lens of interrogation is to resist this categorization. The task is to look for evidence wherever it may reside of their corporeality and, in this case, to be deliberate in foregrounding recent archival research that is becoming available about their lives and living during these early years of the nation.

In Chapter 1, “A Pentadic View of African American Women during the American Civil War,” I use Kenneth Burke’s pentad as a heuristic in drawing forth a compendium of evidence. My effort is to examine critically the contexts and activities of these early generations of women through an interrogation of scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose. As Burke stated in *A Grammar of Motives*:

What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it? . . . We shall use five terms as generating principle of our investigation. They are: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*. Men may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or how he did it, or in what kind of situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it may, any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done

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(scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). (1969a, xv)

Burke first published this statement in 1945, offering to rhetorical (and other) analyses an intuitive framework, a pentad, designed to gather together a fuller, more detailed understanding of human action. The advantage in using the pentad here is that, as a heuristic, it generates multidimensional data by which we can gain an evidence-based clarity about the American ecosystem before and during the American Civil War. Centered in the materiality of human motivation, this approach permits the identification of a broad array of details that can be configured and reconfigured fluidly. From this enriched and well-grounded analytical landscape, we can draw interpretations with enhanced potential to bring visibility, audibility, and intelligibility both to specific parts of the design (for example, African American women as agents of transformative change) and to the whole (for example, rendering a fuller accounting of the American Civil War as a complex multi-stakeholder event in the history of the nation).

This multifaceted analysis permits us to “tack in” and “tack out” in understanding and interpreting action, motivation, and consequence in context. This approach is in keeping with a concept used by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). He offered this sailing metaphor of tacking in and out as a tool for obtaining more vibrant interpretations of various cultures. I chose the pentadic analysis to enrich the analytical landscape and the Geertz metaphor of looking and looking again from different perspectives to enrich the quality of the interpretations drawn from this landscape. The effort in the interpretive process is both to tack in to generate a more coherent, fully rendered, multidimensional view of African American women as actors at this specific point in US history and to tack out to demonstrate that, for this group, the Civil War and the nineteenth century as its more ample context provide a particularly instructive window for enriching our view of the longer trajectories of African American women’s sociopolitical participation in community-building and nation-building agendas over time.

In essence, the circumstances and conditions of the women’s lives during this era formed the landscape for their hopes, desires, and interests. In turn, this landscape constituted an inspirational infrastructure for the ways in which the women engaged in iden-

tity and ethos formation—that is, in the formation of their views of their speaking and writing selves and in the formation of their sense of agency and authority for action. This operation landscape constituted, thereby, the context within which they built expressive practices and traditions and in which they were able to perceive opportune occasions for sociopolitical action. Fundamentally, then, for this group, the decades between 1776 (the founding of the nation) and 1896 (the launching of the National Association of Colored Women) offered a prime—though extended—occasion that they used well to prepare themselves to emerge nationally by 1900 as advocates, activists, and leaders capable of enabling what they perceived to be much needed transformative social change.

In Chapter 2, “Negotiating Ways Forward,” I look at the era of reconstruction, that is, at processes for the reunification of the nation after the Civil War. This era continued to be a time of complexity with multiple stakeholders. I take up a regional point of view to examine many uncertainties that surrounded African American women in this context to draw attention to the reality that their negotiating of ways forward was mired in complexity. Emphasis, however, is on the notion that, even in this imperfect and uncharted world, African American women had great expectations that the nation was moving toward positive change for their race. They took very seriously their opportunities to forward progress and change and, perhaps even more seriously, their personal obligations to respond to their opportunities well. In their commitments to action despite ongoing oppressions and persistent acts of disregard and discrimination they claimed space for their strengths and abilities, tried to shoulder their part of the load, worked conscientiously and faithfully to make whatever differences they were able to make, and held fast to their hopes and dreams.

In viewing this first part of the analysis more holistically, my intention is to clarify that, even though power elites may not have noticed or understood a rationality for paying attention to African American women, there is, nevertheless, an escalating body of evidence that African American women were indeed actively and thoughtfully engaged in sociopolitical work. In Part I, the imperative is to bring greater visibility to their ways of working—by their own lights, in keeping with their own living conditions and opportunities, and by means of the resources for action that were available to them. Thus in Chapter 2, I concentrate on sharing some of the ways in which the women were implementing their visions. The

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purpose for presenting these examples is to show how the women were creating space for themselves to survive and to prosper in doing whatever they could to help both their communities and themselves. This approach to argumentation by examples is designed to illustrate specific ways in which the nineteenth century became, in effect, a cauldron in which African American women were using their hearts, minds, fortitude, and backbones to do what they thought needed to be done. By these strategies, I posit that they were evolving as sociopolitical actors, building up their experiences, and creating a remarkable cache of wisdom.

The central touchstone in this section is an acknowledgment of Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784) as an enslaved woman who stepped out with distinction as the first African American woman to publish poetry. I emphasize, however, that she was also among the first African American women to use her public presence as a published author to build a network of relationships with power elites, nationally and abroad. In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War and the formation of the nation, Wheatley engaged in regular communication with members of her network, from Samuel Odom (Native American pastor and missionary) to George Washington (the leader of the rebellion and future president of the United States). In these conversations, she shared her views, advocating for the idea that all humans are the handiwork of God regardless of their abilities, and by extension, indicating her interests in human rights, the recognition of human potential, and of course, underscoring the ways in which Christian belief supported the ending of slavery. While Phillis Wheatley wrote herself into the founding of the nation, the general status of African American women in the United States at that time was based on their categorization as chattel. What becomes evident, therefore, is that, whether enslaved, freed, or freeborn, their lives in the larger society were defined and shaped by their oppressed status and downtrodden condition, such that any self-determined actions were acts of defiance, which ultimately became a primary source for the stereotyping of African American women, regularly, as “sassy” women who defied their place in the social hierarchies of their day.

In noting the sassiness stereotype for African American women’s behavior, it is within the scope of a good imagination to see that their unauthorized and unrecognized work was unorthodox by mainstream standards and expectations, and thereby unintelligible. The proposition here, though, is that quite likely their habits

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of care were culturally informed and that these identity and ethos formation processes did not begin on North American shores in 1619. More likely, the first women and girls of African descent in the Americas brought with them values, principles, and habits of action from their African communities to their new homes. The presumption is that they were able to pass these frameworks on from generation to generation, as I articulated, for example, in *Traces of a Stream* (Royster 2000, 77–107).

The bottom line in this assessment is that African Americans—enslaved, freed, and freeborn—were present in the colonial world. A reasonable expectation, therefore, is that in the 1770s, as word about the revolution as a war of independence spread throughout colonial territories, African Americans, including the women, could see for themselves that the Americans' fighting for independence was a phenomenon in motion. Being human beings with functioning brains and powers of observation and critique (rather than being animalistic and inferior), with the possibility of the colonists winning the war, they understood what was happening and they were encouraged by these points of view to imagine better horizons for themselves. It is not hard to imagine, therefore, that they saw the founding of the nation as a democracy for all to be a beacon of hope and great expectations.

A point to be highlighted in rethinking this time period with African American women in mind is that the long-standing strengths of these women as women who worked outside of the domestic sphere of their own homes and families can be documented archivally throughout these early years. By all accounts, their abilities to work and to get things done (for example, as house servants, field workers, seamstresses, and so forth) became part of their sense of sociocultural identity. By mid-nineteenth century, after more than 150 years of devastating conditions, African American women certainly knew, as Sojourner Truth proclaimed in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech (1851), that she could do the job of any man and that she could survive horrors (beatings, rapes, hard work of various kinds, family being stripped away, and more). They also knew, as Truth suggested, that their efforts to survive contributed in meaningful ways to their claims to truth, justice, equality, and empowerment for the race.¹ From this perspective, we can conclude that over the decades since 1619 the behavior and actions of these early generations of African American women informed an ever-evolving sense, not so much of identity and

voice in simplistic terms, but a “New World” sense of agency, vision, and personally defined authority within the larger American democratic experiment.

The core assertion in Chapter 2, thereby, is that, historically, African American women have been engaging in sociopolitical work over the course of their presence on the North American continent in that they have brought their talents and sensibilities to bear in doing their parts to survive amid devastating conditions. While they infamously were called upon to do whatever they managed to do surreptitiously, their ability to speak out publicly about their visions and observations depended on their status, resources, and often their geographical locations. For example, the women who were living in the North away from slave plantations were able to participate more regularly in the Black abolitionist movement (as in the case of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Sarah Mapps Douglass, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and others). Even so, when these women spoke out, typically they were heard by specialized audiences (African American audiences, audiences filled by other abolitionist or abolitionist leaning groups) rather than being taken seriously by white elites in the traditional arenas of power—where, by both race and gender, African American women were not even permitted to participate or to be officially recognized but where terms of engagement for what constituted value and the story of American excellence were largely determined.

Despite persistent barriers and constraints, however, another key point to highlight is that, still, during these years African American women were speaking and writing. Increasing numbers of African American women were developing their literate abilities and engaging in an escalating level of rhetorical events that enhanced their levels of rhetorical expertise. With these tools and talents, they were negotiating their ways forward, ramping up their capacities to speak for themselves via multiple genres of expression and demonstrating that they were quite able, as well, to use these growing strengths to pose, analyze, and solve problems in support of progress and change. Two such women in the North who were openly exercising their talents and abilities during and after the Civil War were Maritcha Rémond Lyons and her friend and colleague Victoria Earle Matthews. Lyons was a freeborn African American woman from New York who became an educational administrator. Matthews was born enslaved in Fort Valley, Georgia, but moved with her family to New York after the ending of slav-

ery and built a remarkable career in community development and journalism.

In the South before the Civil War, opportunities were certainly not open for African American women, regardless of whether they were enslaved, freed, or freeborn, but some of them found ways, nevertheless, to fashion inventive opportunities for themselves, as I highlight in Chapter 1 via the showcasing of Aspasia Cruvellier Mirault in Savannah, Georgia, and Mariah Lilly Hunt in Hancock County, Georgia. Drawing attention to the ways of working for women who were living and working in the South rather than just the North underscores how, during these early years of the nation before, during, and after the Civil War, new generations of women were rising—continuing to demonstrate capacities to find or make their way to survival and prosperity and, as the decades proceeded, to become themselves or to support other women who would go on to become high-performing leaders in their community. Throughout these years African American women exemplified patterns of leadership and action that were steadily coalescing over the nineteenth century as evidence of their escalating strengths as sociopolitical advocates, activists, and leaders.

Not to be underestimated, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Civil War did, in fact, legally end slavery, offering the nation a signature opportunity to recalibrate its commitments to truth, freedom, justice, equality, and empowerment—even though the nation did not adequately live up to its potential for change. For African American women, however, the moment of emancipation via the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments became a catalyst for bolder dreams and more robust action. They could see that this situation was an excellent opportunity to make more room for themselves in the inhospitable world they inhabited. By law they were free to participate in public spaces. They courageously shared their insights, spoke for themselves, and were innovative in addressing the problems that plagued both their communities and themselves.

The opportunities African American women encountered after the war permitted them to broaden their geographical scope without permission, to increase the number of women with the privilege to participate more freely in sociopolitical action and public venues, and to extend the range of available means and mechanisms for action. In effect, the war functioned as a point of coalescence for more strategic utilizations of their evolving habits and

their sensibilities of themselves as socially responsible political actors in a changing world. From this perspective, as devastating and violent as it was, the Civil War was also a breath of fresh air for this group of people who, after more than two hundred years of intensely oppressive conditions, really needed a good cleansing breath. The war functioned as a dramatic kairotic opportunity to breathe more deeply and to exercise their hopes and dreams of a better world in addressing and advancing their own priorities, needs, and desires.

The questions in analyzing and interpreting these assertions and the bodies of evidence of engagement that support them are really basic ones. What was the range of African American women's work before, during, and after the Civil War? What were their responsibilities, challenges, and concerns? To what extent did their work demonstrate sociopolitical awareness? What were the values added as these women were inventive in taking advantage of opportunities of various kinds, including their acquisition of literacy and their growing expertise in using this New World tool as writers, speakers, and strategic thinkers and problem solvers? How did their patterns of work over this time period evolve amid their negotiations of possibilities for going forward into more coherent strategies for sociopolitical action in their multilayered quest for truth, freedom, justice, equality, and empowerment?

In exploring the answers to such questions, I track the escalating presence of African American women in various civic discourses through their work and their rhetorical performances from the founding of the nation, through the Civil War, and through the turn of the twentieth century. The Civil War in particular constituted a moment of opportunity for transformative change for the women in leveraging a more robust capacity to engage in important sociopolitical work. With this trajectory as context, the inquiry goals for this project inevitably became: (1) to subvert the neutralizing frameworks imposed on African American women's lives and achievements by their historically designated status as chattel and to see them more clearly as consequential beings; (2) to listen as the women speak for themselves about their own visions and experiences and to use data analytics and various tools of visualization capable of yielding more generative and dynamic perspectives of the nature and scope of the women's work; (3) to counter ungrounded presumptions about their lack of value and consequence via different theoretical frameworks and interpretive

sight lines that cast light on the breadth and depth of their labor and, more pointedly, on the aspects of this labor that are definable explicitly within the contours of ambitious sociopolitical work; and (4) to recalibrate the paradigms for analysis and interpretation so that we can be more respectful of their actual lives, contributions, and achievements in recognizing the extent to which they deserve to have their stories of excellence told in our narratives of nation.

My core assertion here is that, by the end of the nineteenth century, these women had found ways to broaden the circles of their rhetorical and sociopolitical engagement. When we pay attention to their efforts, they were doing so with noticeable impact with regard to their increased participation in activities related to social justice and social reform. I draw attention to the archival evidence of their participation in various enterprises, their sociopolitical awareness, their rhetorical prowess, and their astute strategic planning in taking advantage of opportunities to address various problems and issues in their communities. Of particular note is that, through their acquisition of literacy as a new operational tool and their increasing opportunities over the century to exercise their growing multimodal expertise as speakers and writers, these women were able to build a remarkable record of their lives and work.

This base of information offers contemporary researchers and scholars a useful springboard for rethinking interpretive frameworks—for sense-making, knowledge-making, history-telling, and storytelling processes. From the perspective of feminist rhetorical studies, we have a signal opportunity to engage in more robust examinations of the ways in which African American women over this time period managed to operationalize and sustain a sense of self and agency; to craft a dynamic vision of democratic values and civic, social, and ethical responsibility; and to enhance operational habits and patterns for advocacy, action, and leadership—despite the fact that their range of motion was significantly constrained, still, by the mores of their day. My view of this opportunity is that a compelling way to operationalize it is to use three specific lenses for interrogation identified in this study: visibility, audibility, and intelligibility.

With the Civil War as the standpoint, the imperative is to look backward from 1865—that is, before, during, and at the ending of the Civil War—in order to gain a clearer understanding of African American women as women constantly under siege rather than simply at war in a national military conflict. What we know is that

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African American women were relentlessly under attack in an inhospitable society. Their constant task was to demonstrate that, although incessantly maligned and besieged, they were steadfast and courageous in maintaining focus and working to advance progress and change with an indomitable spirit very much intact. When we look forward from the Civil War toward the end of the nineteenth century, the imperative is to formulate more richly rendered views of the evolution of their actions. The task is to bring forward evidence to clarify and confirm the patterns, practices, and legacies of the work they set in motion over the fullness of this time period.

In Part II, “Audibility,” my concern is with countering the marginalizing of the visions and voices of African American women. The effort, therefore, is to acknowledge that these women have had things to say all along and that, as rightful citizens of the nation, we should treat their visions and voices with more respect and regard than heretofore. What have they been saying? Why? How? Does their thinking and problem solving deserve more attention, especially since the issues and problems that have drawn their attention continue in our own time to be societal challenges? To address such questions, I cast more direct attention on a range of ways in which African American women did speak for themselves across the nineteenth century. I focus on the need to amplify these voices and to enrich our understanding of the range of their interests and commitments over the century. My approach is to identify fifteen short texts or excerpts from longer texts written by African American women whose work confirms they were game changers both within and often well beyond their own communities. I cluster the exemplars into Chapter 3, “Before the Civil War,” Chapter 4, “During the Civil War,” Chapter 5, “After the Civil War,” and Chapter 6, “At the Turn of the Century.”

With this set of texts I proclaim the women’s presence, as declared through their own writing and through the proactivity of their visions, voices, and concerns. Given the genres they chose, which included poetry, essays and speeches, journalism, autobiography, and professional analyses, these texts offer provocative opportunities to consider the processes and patterns by which the women performed their work in facing challenges and fomenting positive change. Their words stand today as witness to their deliberate uses of language as advocates, activists, and leaders and serve as artifacts of their visions and desires for social justice and transformative social change. In essence, African American women spoke up

for their ideas and demonstrated that they were inspired to work, even as they were surrounded by inhospitable conditions. At this point, the multiple genre evidence of their textual record confirms their focus on and commitments to making meaningful differences in their own lives and in the lives of others.

The first text is an essay written by Maria Miller Stewart, “Religion And The Pure Principles Of Morality, The Sure Foundation On Which We Must Build.” It was published on October 8, 1831, by William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp in *The Liberator*. Stewart is considered to be the first woman and the first African American woman to speak on political issues in public, before mixed audiences of men and women. I draw the other texts from various public arenas in which African American women were writing over the remainder of the century. My imperative is to demonstrate the fluidity of their choices within the typical generic practices of their day and to document their habits of using whatever means were available to carry out their desires and address their concerns. Part II ends with a focus on the implications of these exemplary texts in illustrating African American women’s habits of leadership and action.

In Part III, “Intelligibility,” I focus attention on the need to use the enhanced visibility and audibility presented in Parts I and II to shift paradigms for interpretation. The presumption is that, although historically it may have been policy and practice to ignore the viability, impact, and consequence of African American women, evidence suggests that continuing to do so is not productive for our nation or the world. My focus, then, is on developing tools and frameworks that permit us to see this landscape more fully and to determine the extent to which there may actually be value to add for community development and national building agenda. The proposition is that, as evidenced by the cohort of women that I showcase in this book, African American women have generated swirls of impact and consequence. Perhaps more importantly, the valuing of these legacies matters in the ongoing human enterprise of making a better world for us all.

In this section, I take the information from Part I and Part II and use it as leverage for resetting conceptual frameworks and for interrogating the impacts and consequence of African American women’s sociopolitical labor. The intention is to shift the paradigm for interpretation—that is, to construct an ideological framework within which these women’s sociopolitical labor gains intelligibility, both individually and collectively. I direct specific attention to the

1890s as the era of post-Reconstruction, the rise of the Black Club-women's Movement, and the formative years of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW, renamed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in 1904). NACW was established at the turn of the nineteenth century and continues to function in the twenty-first century as a nationwide organization with a robust agenda for social action.

The decade of the 1890s serves as the third in a triad of markers indicating the trajectories of African American women as sociopolitical actors across the nineteenth century—with the founding of the nation and the American Civil War constituting the other two critical moments. During this third time period, the resurgence of southern elite leadership and Jim Crowism as common practice underscores that, despite ongoing oppressions, the decade was a time of intense activity for this cohort of leaders. They were able to maximize habits of action that had been evolving over decades, and with their ongoing commitments to the bedrock values of the nation they were able to set in motion an array of legacies to get things done. Over the decades since then, their work has demonstrated strength: in offering tools for enabling and sustaining change, in supporting various sociopolitical agenda, and in being a model capable of replication in other instances as well—such as the Black sorority movement (as the numbers of college-educated African American women increased), the modern Civil Rights Movement (as the need for social justice and social change escalated in the twentieth century, and the negotiation of participation in various professional communities (as African Americans entered all sorts of professions).

With a focus in Part III on using the first two sections to develop a more generative model for analysis and interpretation, this section begins with Chapter 7, “Recasting Frameworks for Engagement and Regard.” I explore the landscape for African American women's sociopolitical work that had formed by the 1890s. More explicitly, I look at the roles that literacy and rhetorical prowess played in the hands of women who had gained knowledge and experience as speakers, writers, organizers, and community leaders in various professional arenas, and who had also formed strong linkages with the African American periodical press. In this chapter I cast a brighter light on mechanisms and strategies that the women used to sharpen their visions, amplify their voices, expand their audiences, and build collaborative relationships with others.

One critical factor at the time was that, through these experiences, they became increasingly and painfully aware of the need not simply to participate and join with others to do their parts but to be more aggressive in setting their own national agenda for their own agency, action, and leadership—if they were going to create the impacts and consequences in the world that they wanted to create.

In Chapter 8, “Shifting Interpretive Paradigms,” I take on the challenge of dismantling myths that continue to cloud the public engagement and sociopolitical impact of African American women. I pull together the information presented in the preceding chapters to show the rise of the NACW as a crystalizing moment. I direct specific attention to the process of institution building and the role played by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, her network of colleagues and collaborators, and her newspaper *Woman’s Era* in facilitating a collective and coherent national agenda for African American women’s activism and leadership. My intention in Chapter 8 is not to rehearse facts about NACW that are already in evidence, given the steady scholarship that has been produced and published by historians, particularly African American scholars, over the last forty years (see Wesley 1984, Salem 1990, White 1999, Cash 2001, Tuuri 2018, and others). This cohort of researchers and scholars have been compelling in documenting the Black Clubwomen’s Movement as robust and substantive. In complement to this scholarship, the focus here is on the strategies that Ruffin used to build community and to create an institutional infrastructure for action.

In Chapter 8, therefore, I focus more specifically on *Woman’s Era*, as a manageable data set of published work. Using mapping and other analytical tools associated with digital humanities, I sort through the three years of issues of this journal (1894–1897). The intention is to articulate the strategic framework used by Ruffin in organizing and developing the journal; to look closely at the mission, concerns, and the network of contributors; to place the journal’s “Call to Confer” within the context of African American women’s culturally informed habits of sociopolitical work; and ultimately, to account for the ideological choice of founding NACW as an innovative and coherent mechanism for social change—with the motto “Lifting As We Climb.”

In the concluding section, “Last Words,” I focus on envisioning the last mile of a worthy quest. A core imperative for this final section is to reemphasize the notion that the long-standing labor of African American women with sociopolitical intentions has been

persistent, innovative, and strategic. Across the nineteenth century, cohorts of these women have been active and outspoken as advocates, activists, and leaders in the persistent quest of African American citizens for human and civil rights. Evidence abounds that they took advantage of whatever resources were available to advance truth, freedom, justice, equality, and empowerment and to create a more hospitable place for their own lives and work.

In claiming a rightful place for the strengths and capacities of African American women leaders, I accept the reality that, historically, they have been categorized overwhelmingly as women: (1) who engage in physical labor—in keeping with the metaphor made famous by Zora Neale Hurston that African American women are “the mules of the earth”; and (2) who are capable of carrying a heavy load in silence. In this volume I proclaim, however, that despite the elements of this metaphor that may have some merit, African American women’s work has evidenced more than mere physical labor. We should not ignore or set aside the evidence of their intellectualism, their sociopolitical imperatives and intentions, including their awareness of the world around them, their understanding of the limitations imposed upon their choices, their inventiveness in the face of inhospitable circumstances and conditions, and their negotiating of pathways to survival and prosperity using a range of strategies.

The ultimate assertion, though, is that, fundamentally, whether enslaved, freed, or freeborn, African American women were called upon throughout the nineteenth century, by their conditions and circumstances within a culture deeply invested in the institution of slavery and its resilient effects, to hold fast to their own sense of possibility and potential. In keeping with their cultural frameworks, the central priority has been for them to be socially responsible in taking care of themselves and others, in whatever ways they could—because they knew that they could do so and, therefore, should do so. With this role as a vital mandate, the core proposition is this: African American women’s experiences kept demonstrating a basic truth. They were quite viscerally aware of the oppressions that surrounded them, and they understood that changes in their horizons would not be presented to them on a silver platter. It was, therefore, no stretch for them to see that any improvements, far more often than not, would depend on their own ingenuity—in finding or making their own paths; in using their own visions, inventiveness, and hard work to do what was needed; and in supporting oth-

ers who might carry on for the future. This awareness is poignantly illustrated, in fact, by the jazz singer Billie Holiday in the popular song “God Bless the Child That’s Got His Own.” African American women have not simply found ways to act; they have also had to create them, and they have shared with younger people the necessity of understanding this maxim. For the generation of women leaders who launched NACW at the end of the nineteenth century, this organization became a beacon of light as a prime example of a distinctive process for what it can mean to make your own way.

As we imagine the last mile of this worthwhile journey, it becomes much clearer that many African American women (more, in fact, than many people might imagine) were sociopolitical actors, variously defined. The social, political, and ethical dimensions of their lives and work need to be envisioned, acknowledged as worthy, and incorporated into the official narratives of excellence for the nation. My goal is to confirm that their work in support of the progress and survival of themselves and their communities, as illustrated across the nineteenth century, was not just reactive, random, or mindless. Before the Civil War, specific women managed to achieve noteworthy accomplishments, with the use of whatever resources and support were available to them. With the coming of the Civil War, more means emerged. After the Civil War, by the laws of the land, there were cracks in the armor of their oppressors that permitted an envisioning of transformative change, and the women rose gallantly to new occasions—with literacy, learning, rhetorical prowess, and a broader set of work experiences in their hands. By the end of the century, African American women were far better positioned to profit from their collective energy and to function more coherently and strategically in fomenting the changes that they felt would make a better nation and world. More important than their ambitious goals, however, is the evidence that, by thought, word, and deed, they saw their work as normal and necessary investments in themselves, in others, and in the future of the nation.

A final point in this last chapter is that the benefits of taking the work of African American women more seriously—and as consequential for the narratives of nation—are manifold. At the crux of these benefits is the notion that the legacies of African American women’s work have continued over the decades to leverage possibilities for making the world a better place. Although the ecosystems in which this work has continued to occur have ebbed and flowed from generation to generation in terms of providing nurtur-

ing and supportive environments or not, what has been constant is the women's dedication to offering their labor to support socio-political interests. A closer view of this work confirms that these nineteenth-century women were warrior women on a grand quest for truth, freedom, justice, equality, empowerment, and peace; they were resilient and relentless in getting good work done, with a sense of obligation to pass their legacies of thought and action forward for future generations.

Bringing a critical vision to this landscape, the most consequential assertion I make in this volume is that African American women are worthy exemplars of what it means to work for change—deliberately and intentionally in time, place, and space. Both individually and collectively they have exhibited ethically responsible decision-making, culturally respectful action, and a multivariant sense of purpose, well-grounded both tacitly and overtly in their lived experiences and intricately entwined with their long-standing patterns of socially responsible engagement. Historically, these factors have shaped and deployed a distinctive and richly endowed intellectual history that remains in motion still.

Based on this assertion, the imperative for research and scholarship is to shift analytical and interpretive paradigms. In shifting our own ways of working, a primary task is to be more generative in using frameworks and methodologies that interrogate this history more carefully and caringly and that have a greater capacity to cast deliberate attention toward understanding the patterns of this work and its intellectual underpinnings in terms of both theory and practice. By doing so, we gain a better hold of the nature, ways, means, and impact of a fuller vista of sociopolitical work, and we are better positioned to recognize, acknowledge, and appreciate a group of women who perfected over time a compelling operational model. Central to operationalizing this type of approach is recognizing the necessity of seeing these women, not simply as hardworking women (as indeed they have been) but, rather, as advocates, activists, and leaders with a purpose who have performed with consequence in their worlds. They have been (and continue to be) assets in the places and spaces where they work. Our opportunity, then, is to look for where they are doing this work; to interrogate kaleidoscopically what, how, and why they are doing what they are doing; to listen to their words and advice; and to presume that their work might likely have values at the local level but also far beyond. In the twenty-first century we have, as we have

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periodically had in the past, a sterling opportunity to broaden the scope of our expectations as we keep the arc of our national history (and the stories that we tell) bending toward freedom, justice, and equality—for all.