Identifying Emma Dunham Kelley: Rethinking Race and Authorship

HOLLY JACKSON

[I]

FOR WELL OVER THREE DECADES, SCHOLARS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN studies have carried out a large and impressive literary recovery project, excavating and reprinting the works of numerous unknown or unjustly forgotten African American authors. Chief among these efforts, Oxford University Press published the forty-volume Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers in 1988 under the direction of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. This project bridged the gap between the antebellum slave narrative and the Harlem Renaissance novel, bringing to light an entire tradition of African American women's writing, widely distributing the primary texts necessary to make this field accessible as an academic specialty, and thus establishing the canon that has been studied and taught since that time. Many of these works were previously out of print, making it nearly impossible, as Gates explains in his foreword to the series, for scholars to find copies. In fact, it was his discovery of one such "lost" novel, *Four Girls at Cottage City*, by Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, that inspired him to put these works back into print, "in part," he adds, "so that I could read them myself" (xx). The series reprinted the 1898 edition of *Four Girls*, as well as Kelley's first novel, *Megda* (1891).[1]

An unprecedented wave of scholarship on nineteenth-century black women's writing followed the publication of this series, and Kelley gained prominence as one of the most important, if puzzling, authors in this tradition. Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992), Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention* (1993), and Deborah McDowell's "*The Changing Same*" (1995), now classic studies of black women's domestic fiction, cemented Kelley's place

HOLLY JACKSON is a doctoral candidate in English and American literature at Brandeis University. Her dissertation concerns antiracist deconstructions of the family in nineteenth-century American literature.

[© 2007 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA]

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the African American canon and offered readings of her novels that have stood without significant revision since then. They emphasize her Christian outreach and her feminist, or at least women-centered, sensibility. Scholarly interest in Kelley continued through the late 1990s, notably in another chapter by Tate on the workings of desire in *Megda* in her *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998), and up to the present in book articles on modern subjectivity and racial ontology by Carla L. Peterson (2003) and the politics of pedagogy by Dale M. Bauer (2005).

Still, the gaping absence in this scholarship was the author's biography. She remained a complete historical cipher, the most basic facts of her life, including her birth and death dates, totally unknown.[2] Scholars have speculated that Kelley lived in eastern Massachusetts because her books were published in Boston and partially set in Martha's Vineyard. Due to her name change between the two novels, many have assumed that she was married between 1891 and 1895, though these theories were unconfirmed. A photograph of the author from the frontispiece of *Megda* has provided the only glimpse of the woman behind these two novels (see p. 730).

Despite the considerable scholarly attention that Kelley has garnered as a pioneer of black women's writing, *Megda* and *Four Girls at Cottage City* differ from most other works in this tradition in that they seem to be unconcerned with African American life or politics. Both books follow a group of carefree adolescent female friends through Christian conversion to appropriate wifehood. They contain no mention of the hardships facing black people at this time, or predictions for the future of the race in America, so characteristic of fin de siècle black novels. The most unusual aspect of Kelley's work is the apparent whiteness of her characters, most of whom have blue eyes and skin described repeatedly in comparison to "pure" or "driven" snow, or as "dazzling white, without one tinge of pink in it" (*Megda* 36). These descriptions abound to the point that, as Molly Hite notes, "whiteness emerges as the most overused element of characterization" (xxix). The only African American characters in all of Kelley's work seem to be a "colored" footman in *Megda* and a "colored" attendant in *Four Girls at Cottage City*.

Still, critics have enfolded these novels into the African American tradition, negotiating the problem of the characters' whiteness by arguing that Kelley's original audience of black readers would have interpreted these women as "white mulattas," or very light-complexioned women of color. Scholars have often interpreted the extremely white world of Kelley's works as a kind of postracial utopia. For example, Tate argues that "by making racial difference unimportant, this novel already presumes as gratified the political objectives of racial equality depicted in traditional black works" (*Psychoanalysis* 24). Carla Peterson agrees that Kelley "sought to offer her readers—particularly African Americans—a vision of what it would be like to live in a modern world in which racial difference no longer existed" (113). Critics have even cautioned against interrogating this confounding whiteness, such as duCille's warning that "to query too intensely the characters' racial identity . . . may be to place undue emphasis on the very subjectivity Kelley has chosen to place under erasure . . . these characters might be most effectively read as *raceless*" (54). Thus, despite her seeming divergence from most other novelists in this tradition, Kelley has been perennially cited and studied as an example of the diversity of strategies employed by women of color in the 1890s, a decade in which their literature flourished despite, and in reaction to, the dismal historical moment, widely considered the nadir of post-Emancipation African American experience (see Logan).

As it turns out, these novels, and their author, are far more anomalous than scholars have realized. There is no evidence to suggest that Kelley was African American. In fact, she

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Emma Dunham Kelley, from the frontispiece of *Megda* (1891). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

and every member of her family are identified as white in every vital record and census in which they appear. All existing documentation points to the conclusion that she had no African ancestors. State and federal records of her life, in addition to family histories, offer a surprising new picture of this author who has come to be celebrated as a pioneer of African American women's literature.

Emma Dunham Kelley was born on 11 November 1863 in Dennis, Massachusetts. Her parents were Isaac Dunham Kelley, a mariner,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Gabrelia A. (Chase) Kelley, both born in Dennis. They were married on 21 April 1859, and had their first daughter, Alice M. Kelley, within a year. Isaac was killed at sea on 4 April 1863, seven months before Emma was born. Gabrelia remarried but was widowed again before she was thirty. Emma; her sister, Alice; and their half-brother, Herbert, were raised in Lonsdale, a mill town in Rhode Island. The family followed work around this area, moving to Saylesville for work at a bleachery, getting by with the help of their mother's relatives, particularly their Aunt Lottie, Charlotte Chase.

Kelley married Benjamin A. Hawkins in 1893. Their marriage was plagued by financial difficulties, even to the point of the foreclosure of their house, as all their money was sunk into Benjamin's inventions, most notably the Hawkins Heater, which never proved a valuable investment. The royalties from Kelley's novels provided a significant part of the family's income. She started a manuscript for a third novel but never finished it. Emma and Benjamin had two daughters, Gala E., born in 1894, and Megda D., born in 1897. Benjamin died in 1929, at which time Emma lived in Providence with her two daughters, both unmarried. Gala and Megda did secretarial work, Gala as a stenographer and Megda as a clerk, and they were members of Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church in Providence. Emma died after a long illness on 22 October 1938 and was buried in Moshassuck Cemetery in Central Falls, Rhode Island.[3]

Every one of the official records designates Kelley and every member of her family as racially white. In the Massachusetts records, race is recorded in a category marked "color (other than white)" or "color: white, black, or mulatto," which is marked only for a person of color. The Kelleys are left blank in this category each time they appear. The 1860 census further tallies the racial data at the bottom of each page, counting zero people of color on the pages on which Emma's parents, sister, grandmother, aunts, and cousins appear. Even more clearly, the federal censuses of Rhode Island after the turn of the century record everyone's race with a representative letter, and each individual in the Hawkins household, including Emma, her husband, their daughters, and her mother, is marked with a W for "white" in 1910, 1920, and 1930. Of course, no one's blackness or whiteness can be proved as such if we understand race not as a biologically quantifiable fact but rather as a social tradition that considers parentage the deciding factor. Kelley was as white as anyone whose parents, grandparents, and all known ancestors claimed to be white. She did not identify herself as a person of color at any time of her life, and her living relatives believe themselves and their entire family line to be white.

Before examining the implications of these findings, we should pause to consider the politics of using the census as a method of researching race. Because our conception of race is genealogical, family history serves as the only means of determining Kelley's identity. Unfortunately, however, relying on the census or any other state practice of demographic documentation to find the truth about race amounts to participation in a system that helps create and regulate the illusion of separate and discernible racial categories. It is worth quoting Kwame Anthony Appiah here at length:

> Current U.S. practices presuppose, by and large, that there is a fact of the matter about everyone as to whether or not she is African American. One is required to fill in forms for all sorts of purposes that fix one's race. . . . As a result, many people, who think of themselves as clearly and obviously black or white or something other than either of these in the racial system, are encouraged by this practice in the belief that the racial system is in fact relatively straightforward. (*Ethics* 192)

Documents like the census hide the logical faultiness of the concept of race, since "the state appears to be able to construct successful practices that assume that social conception"

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(192). Furthermore, the basic assumption that an individual's genealogy aligns with his or her racial identity is also false. Beyond what we ordinarily accept about the racial "hybridity" of African Americans, Appiah suggests that "very many—perhaps even a majority—of the Americans who are descended from African slaves 'look white,' are treated as white, and identify as such" (185). Thus, though people with a "black" phenotype are considered racially distinct because of their African ancestry, some people considered white in all other senses share this African heritage. This issue complicates the process of racial identification for any individual, but, as I argue here, it has a particularly important bearing on the special racial function of the author in the practice of literary studies. This essay disrupts the existing scholarship on Emma Dunham Kelley in which she is assumed to be an African American author. However, my point is not so much to assert her whiteness to correct the "mistake" of this racial categorization as to shed light on the disciplinary uses of authorial racial identity in critical practice.

[II]

Kelley's categorization as a black author dates back at least as early as Maxwell Whiteman's 1955 bibliography *A Century of Fiction by American Negroes*. Whiteman notes that *Megda* contains "no suggestion of Negro characters," but he provides no information on the author or any citation of precedent for his categorization of Kelley as a "Negro" (33). This confusion might have arisen in part from a misunderstanding of the novels' publisher, James H. Earle of Boston. Earle also published *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*, by Frances E. W. Harper, now a classic of nineteenth-century black fiction. Because of Earle's connection to this well-known text, catalogers may have thought that his press had a particular interest in black women's fiction.[4]

A more likely reason that Kelley has been received as a black author is the photograph of her that has circulated with *Megda* since its first edition in 1891. When asked to speculate about the origins of her misidentification, Gates responded, "I think it was the picture." He continued, "You put that picture up in my barbershop, and I guarantee the vote would be to make her a sister" (Mehegan 5). Critics have repeatedly called on the author's appearance as primary evidence to affirm her blackness in the absence of any corroborating biographical information. In the introduction to *Megda*, Hite holds that the photograph of the author "clearly depicts an Afro-American woman" (xxviii). Tate was the only scholar even to suggest, in a footnote, that the photograph is ambiguous. She states that it "presents a woman who would be labeled a light-skinned mulatto by those readers who knew her racial identity. She would probably be called white by those who did not know her racial background. Thus, unlike Molly Hite, I contend that white readers would not have automatically assumed Kelley-Hawkins to be black" (*Domestic Allegories* 258n41). Tate acknowledges Kelley's ambiguous appearance and rightly asserts that this fact alone would not disqualify her as an African American in the eyes of readers attuned to racial heterogeneity. Other readings, however, exaggerate the clarity of the photograph, obscuring the dilemma of racial legibility.

The certainty with which critics used this photograph as evidence to confirm Kelley's identity recalls the important role of photography in the history of racial classification. In her study of nineteenth-century American photographic archives, Shawn Michelle Smith explains that photographs "generated and maintained essentialized discourses of interior character, and trained observers in how to read the body for the signs of a knowable interiority" (4). Photography standardized the visual boundaries of race, teaching viewers "what gender and race 'look like'" (5).

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Shelly Eversley observes that the imperative to confirm an author's race before reading his or her writing is a tradition that reaches back to the beginnings of African American literature. The earliest publications of writings by Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Wilson, and others contained prefaces designed to verify the author's race. "In each instance, these prefaces secured a special, racialized reading of their work; and, despite content or narrative style, their essays, poems, and novels became representatively 'Negro'" (xiii). In this way, readers of African American literature have been trained to seek the truth of an author's racial identity in the pages preceding the writing in order to vouch for the authenticity of the work's content. This pattern led readers of *Megda* to take Kelley's photograph in the frontispiece as a racially authenticating preface that justifies "special, racialized reading." In the Schomburg edition, the cover, the preface, and the introduction proclaim *Megda* as the authentic work of a nineteenth-century black woman writer, so that the author's photograph just before the text provides final assurance that the work constitutes African American literature despite its apparently "white" content, presenting the author's perceived black body as a guarantee of her novel's racial belonging. The presentation of the novels and photograph in the Schomburg series provides a setting for interpretation that strongly suggests certain racial readings, much like Gates's rhetorical barbershop.

Interestingly, some critics have interpreted the texts of Kelley's novels, with their predominantly white-skinned, blue-eyed characters, as strategic challenges to the visual legibility of race but do not apply this line of thinking to their own assumptions about the author's appearance in her photograph. For example, Peterson argues that the characters' "racial ambiguity reminds us that exteriority does not always reveal racial identity, that visible signs cannot always serve as an epistemological guarantee." However, she then positively declares, "[N]o such dilemma exists in a reading of the frontispiece of *Megda*. The visible signs of the photographed figure announce the author as black and the text as black-authored" (113). Scholars insist that their subjective perceptions of Kelley's appearance affirm the truth of her identity, revealing a reliance on race as visually legible, despite its unpredictable relation to physical signifiers.

Kelley's focus on the town of Cottage City on Martha's Vineyard, part of the area now called Oak Bluffs, has been considered the primary textual evidence that Kelley was black and that her characters should also be understood as such. In her introduction to *Megda*, Hite credits Gates for identifying this town's long history as a black resort. The existing scholarship on these novels considers this the "key," as Tate calls it, that would have unlocked the racial content of the novels for black readers (*Domestic Allegories* 120). However, the history of this town as a booming black resort does not actually extend as far back as the 1890s, when Kelley's novels were published. Shearer's Cottages, the first rooming house to encourage black people to vacation on the island, opened in 1912. Adelaide Cromwell notes that although the town was "long popular among a small group of old upper-class Negroes in Boston," Oak Bluffs was historically "a white middle-class resort." Starting in the 1930s, large numbers of upper-class African Americans paid "double or triple prices" for the "unpretentious homes built by the previous white owners" (139). Cottage City was not as well known to African Americans in the late nineteenth century as Oak Bluffs became in the twentieth, so there is insufficient evidence to conclude that Kelley's setting her novels in this town would have led their first readers to identify her characters as black. The author most likely associated Cottage City with the white middle-class Protestant revivals for which it was well-known in her lifetime.[5]

Although this particular textual detail does not check out as an unmistakable

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

black cultural reference, meaningful links remain that suggest further consideration of Kelley's work alongside literature written by self-identified African Americans. One of the main strategies by which critics have accounted for the aspects of Kelley's fiction that seemed most aberrant has been to argue that her depictions of whiteness resemble those by other black authors. Tate notes, "if there were only a few such novels of black authorship, which eschew our expectations for central, manifestly black characters, this problem would be inconsequential. However, the Schomburg series contains several additional 'white' or 'raceless' works," and other well-known black authors also wrote "white" novels throughout the twentieth century (*Domestic Allegories* 23). The other "raceless" works in the Schomburg series with which Kelley's novels are regularly paired are A. E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894). Like Kelley, Johnson wrote Christian novels that employ a strategy that critics have described as the "extreme silencing of racial thematics" or a "race-free polity" (Tate, *Domestic Allegories* 118; see also Christian). In fact, duCille finds *Four Girls* to be more conclusively "black" than either of Johnson's novels (54).

More to the point, McDowell argues that "in choosing to create heroines who are physically indistinguishable from white women, Kelley was no different from Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, both of whom wrote novels featuring heroines who could pass for white" ("*Changing Same*" 28). Though her depiction of white-skinned characters might now be said to diverge significantly in other ways from that of Harper or Hopkins, I agree that Kelley's manipulation of skin color and other physical signifiers, as in the work of these two African American authors, sheds light on the historical construction of racial identity. Though other readers have seen Kelley's use of white characters as a black appropriation of racial transparency, I argue that *Four Girls at Cottage City* demonstrates the formation of that transparency, offering an account of white racialization at the turn of the twentieth century.

Four Girls is so undeniably charged with tension about skin color that Tate understandably differentiates it from Kelley's earlier work and also from the novels of Johnson, because it "does not rely on racial indeterminacy." She argues that Allie and Vera are "white mulattas," while the sisters Garnet and Jessie Dare are more clearly characterized as African Americans (*Domestic Allegories* 120). Garnet and Jessie have black eyes and thick, curly dark hair; Allie has blue eyes and straight light-brown hair; and Vera has gray eyes and blond hair. When the girls dress to go out at night, the complexions of the Dare sisters differ so much from those of their friends that they wear different colors accordingly. While "Vera was dressed all in soft black, that made her white skin and golden hair look perfectly lovely," Garnet and Jessie, on the other hand, "wore cream, which was most becoming to their rich complexions and dark eyes" (52). In addition, two scenes turn on the unruliness of the sisters' thick, dark, curly hair in contrast to the smooth, light hair of their friends. In the first instance, Vera accidentally digs a hairpin into Jessie's scalp while trying to contain her hair into braids. She says, "excuse me, Jess, but your hair is so thick it seems impossible for a pin to go through it." Watching the scene, her sister, Garnet, commiserates, "I wish I could do something with my mop" (50). Later, "Jess tries in vain to braid her hair down smoothly, but it will wrap and twist itself around the small fingers" (323). Jess cannot comfortably put her hair up on top of her head like the other girls because of its texture, a classic signifier of racial difference.

If we take these instances of physical difference as evidence in support of Tate's argument that the characters should be understood as light-complexioned women of color, then given their taken-for-granted mobility within a white nineteenth-century social milieu, we

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would have to read *Four Girls at Cottage City* as a novel about racial passing. Actually, the text holds some intriguing openings toward this reading. Paired with Jess's and Garnet's darker complexions is the ongoing suggestion that the sisters are keeping a secret. First of all, the plot contains a number of incidents playing on the tension between appearances and deeper truth. The characters meet with both a fortune-teller and a phrenologist, and the ensuing scenes concern the Dare sisters' resistance to the revelation of the hidden content of their minds. Interestingly, they have a particularly negative response to the attentions of the phrenologist. Jessie starts sobbing while she is being examined, and Garnet rushes forward and physically removes his hands from her sister (329). Considering the use of phrenology as a racial science, these responses could be taken to communicate fear that racial characteristics might be revealed that would not otherwise be apparent. Moreover, it is repeatedly suggested that Garnet's face hides a deep truth that is specifically in contrast with her outward appearance. In one such instance, the phrenologist looks at Garnet's face, "so calm, so untroubled, so firm in its expression of self-control, outwardly," but "Beneath—did the Professor see what was there?" (263). Similarly, as the girls are falling asleep one night, the narrator observes, "the light, falling on Garnet's face, betrayed none of the girl's inward thoughts. The expression seen upon it, was simply one of a contented mind and perfect bodily health. *Was* there nothing more?" (47). This sense of secrecy and the tension between surface and depth, particularly in connection with the two dark characters, provide more than enough evidence to launch a reading of this novel as a passing narrative.

Another interpretation emerges if we entertain the possibility that the novel concerns not precisely blackness but the heterogeneity of whiteness. Kelley's lifetime (1863–1938) covers what we recognize as an extremely tumultuous era in African American history, but as Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, it was also "the most fractious period in the political history of whiteness in the United States" (90).[6] He argues that this era was defined by a crisis of white identity occasioned by European immigrants and experienced through the vocabulary of visual racial differentiation: "white races were subject to the new epistemological system of difference—a new visual economy keyed not only to cues of skin color, but to facial angle, head size and shape, physiognomy, hair and eye color, and physique" (46). In other words, in the cultural moment in which Kelley wrote, physical differences among white peoples carried social meanings that have since become largely illegible: "an earlier generation of Americans *saw* Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness" (Jacobson 10). Although visual assessment of ethnicity may persist, the past century has seen a dramatic change in the political implications of these perceived phenotypes, so that people formerly belonging to divergent racial categories can now function socially as white. *Four Girls* demonstrates the historical process by which racial whiteness was consolidated at the turn of the century, transforming visual signifiers that were once racially meaningful into the slight variations that we have come generally to regard as socially meaningless. This process of subsuming the European immigrants who were once racially troubling into a coherent identity category with the existing white population of the United States delineated the boundaries of "white" and "other" to which racism would largely adhere in the twentieth century.

There is evidence to suggest that Kelley was personally invested in the debate over shades of whiteness. Her living relatives report that her sister, Alice, insisted that the *e* in *Kelley* differentiated them importantly from the Irish Catholic immigrants so hated in the working-class New England towns in which

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Kelleys lived (Henning-Dyson [16 Apr.]). It is even likely that the novelist believed that she was more directly descended from Irish immigrants than she actually was. In a letter, one of her cousins expresses the belief that their grandparents were born in Ireland, and it is possible that Kelley shared this misconception (Henning-Dyson [29 Mar.]). In fact, Kelley's ancestors had no connection to Ireland for centuries before her birth. Her ancestor David O'Killea emigrated from Ireland to New England sometime before 1655. David the Irishman, as he was sometimes called in town records, and his male descendants up to Kelley's father all married women of English and Welsh descent.[7]

Anxiety about being mistaken for an Irish Catholic immigrant was tantamount in the 1890s to fear of being illegible as a white person. Of all of the immigrant groups troubling whiteness in the late nineteenth century, the Irish were most explicitly described as physiognomically other in terms of similarity to African Americans. The Irish were sometimes referred to as "white niggers" or "niggers turned inside out" and were said to be visually apprehended by "the black tint of the skin" (Ignatiev 41; Jacobson 48). The presence of Irish characters in Kelley's work is so prominent that Tate suggests that the main characters of *Megda* might conceivably be "black Irish," a term that she reminds us was used in the nineteenth century to refer to the African heritage of a proportion of the Irish, which was due, as David Roediger explains, to "intermixing with shipwrecked slaves" (4). Tate argues that the racialization of the Irish "revealed to Kelley and her black contemporaries that racial privilege was not automatically associated with white skin color" (*Psychoanalysis* 24). I offer that this claim remains true but that the novels take a different interest in the parameters of white privilege than any previous readings have assumed. Making whiteness legible across a broader range of national backgrounds and ethnic physical appearances in her novels was Kelley's contribution to the consolidation of whiteness, a project that enfolded the author herself into this privileged identity.

Kelley's depiction of whiteness deals not only with ethnicity and skin color but importantly also with class. This tangle of social signifiers in the Plessy-era United States underlies the only direct reference to racial discrimination in all her writing, the odd mention of "nigger heaven" in *Four Girls*, usually cited along with the setting of Cottage City as proof positive that Kelley's novels are African American literature. The girls report that they attend the theater about once a month, even, Jessie adds, "if we do have to get seats in 'nigger heaven.'" Garnet responds indignantly, "I wouldn't say such a thing even in joke, if I were you, Jessie." Then Jessie insists, "An' sure, I'm not saying it in joke. I'm in deadly airnest, be jabbers," slipping into the dialect that she practices throughout the novel as comic relief for the girls (81).

Though previous readings of this novel take this reference to be a protest against racial discrimination, it seems more likely that Jessie means that they go to the theater regularly even though they are compelled by their limited finances to sit in the most undesirable seats. This racist slang term describes the cheapest, top tier of seating in a theater. While in many cases it was the only seating available to black patrons under jim crow segregation, in other cases, white people sat in the upper gallery if they could not afford better seats.[8] The exchange between Jessie and Garnet might best be understood as a reference to the girls' class status. Their careful budgeting and fretting over expenses is noted throughout the text. This understanding of the unfortunate usage of this term clears up what has seemed a major inconsistency, that the girls would have to sit in a segregated part of the theater while they encounter absolutely no difficulty riding the train, finding lodging, and eating in restaurants with the numerous other blue-eyed residents and visitors of Cottage City.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Following Jessie's comment in dialect, Garnet insists that she should not say "nigger heaven" even in jest, perhaps because she has an aversion to racist terminology, but more likely because of her well-established conviction that the use of slang gives the appearance of "low breeding" (88). Despite the fact that they would have to sit in the cheapest seats, Garnet warns her younger sister against behaviors associated with the working class. Always rebelling against her sister's lectures, Jessie responds with a derogatory imitation of an Irish accent. Interestingly, this exchange takes place between the two characters that are notably dark and physically different. Thus, the characters of questionable whiteness are charged with policing appropriate behavior throughout the novel, not only as a model for middle-class respectability but also as a safeguard of whiteness when it is challenged by the social equation of the working-class Irish with African Americans. The novel's flirtation with the otherness of Garnet and Jessie always serves to enfold them back into social whiteness. The cultural work of *Four Girls* centers in its embrace of the Dare sisters as characters that share a social identity with their fair friends. The text obsessively catalogs differences in skin, eyes, hair, and facial features among white characters but offers their friendship as a unifying structure that evacuates the meaning from certain bodily signifiers, rendering them equal under whiteness. Different exterior appearances do not amount to different interior identities, though the sustained tension between these two categories defines the text's racial ideology.[9]

I have offered a reconstruction of Kelley's personal stake in the racial politics of Irishness, using both official and anecdotal information about her ethnic, socioeconomic, and regional positions to underwrite an analysis of the anxiety surrounding whiteness in *Four Girls at Cottage City* as a further demonstration of the power of authorial identity to generate and legitimize a reading. However we identify Kelley, responses to her work provide a rare opportunity to observe what happens in critical practice when an author's identity is destabilized or, more precisely, recognized as unstable. This case suggests not the investigation of individual authors in search of total biographical specificity but rather an awareness of how the illusive promise of that specificity can regulate the exploration of race in fiction, blinker interpretation, and ultimately reinforce racial categories.

[III]

While whiteness has been an extremely restricted site of identification defined by the numerous laws and social customs throughout American history establishing grounds for exclusion even to the remotest generation, Kelley's reception attests to the relative openness of blackness as a racial category and a cultural tradition. Literary studies have established certain textual effects as the calling cards of black expression, but the complete absence of these effects does not warrant the exclusion of a text from the African American tradition. Thus, the larger work for students of race and literature remains, as Tate puts it, "to determine what we mean when we say a work is 'black'" (*Psychoanalysis* 23). This question must surely arise for every reader of Kelley's novels, particularly now that her unexpected biography has surfaced. Why have these overwhelmingly white texts by a white author been included so prominently in the canon of nineteenth-century African American literature in the absence of any corroborating historical data? As McDowell asks, "what formal and thematic features, what narrative strategies give these books a black woman's signature" (Introd. xxvii)? Furthermore, since fifty years of scholars have found this distinctive black signature in the works of a white woman, how can we theorize a legible black presence unique to works by black authors and instate this mark as the organizing principle of a literary tradition?

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In 1895, Victoria Earle Matthews, an African American activist and Kelley's contemporary, defined "race literature" as "the writings emanating from a distinct class—not necessarily race matter; but a general collection of what has been written by the men and women of that Race" (170). Moreover, she declared that when this tradition of race literature developed, it would "of necessity be different in all essential points of greatness . . . from what we may at the present time, for convenience, call American literature" (172). This definition makes authorial identity the only relevant factor, so that anything written by a black author would be included in this literature and considered apart from writings by white authors, regardless of the content of the works. Matthews asserts the uniqueness of the black voice, insisting that writings on any subject by a black author would necessarily differ from the white American tradition.

Though Matthews's hundred-year-old thesis remains the guiding principle for determining what counts as African American literature, present-day critics often shy away from explicitly asserting authorial race as the sole grounds for defining the boundaries of this literature; they conscientiously avoid any hint of racial essentialism by offering readings that confirm the blackness of the texts themselves. The Schomburg Library series is one canon-building project organized under Gates's editorship by his inestimably influential postformal theory of the African American tradition. His introduction to the series stresses that the works are grouped together not because they were written by African Americans but because the texts themselves share a set of formal qualities that bind them together: "Literary works configure into a tradition not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin." He goes on to argue that issuing the works of the nineteenth-century African American women's tradition together for the first time enables readers to see the "formal bonding" that indicates that they read each other's work, "and it is only through formal bonding that we can know a literary tradition" (xviii).

Gates justifiably differentiates his theory from any notion of racial expression grounded in a shared essence, but racial biologism need not underlie the sense that race provides the ground on which authors of African American literature often "feel akin" and contemplate the value and limits of identification with the work of other authors. No doubt, insistence on the African American novel as text was an important antidote to earlier sociological readings of black literature, but an account of the African American tradition that distances itself from the importance of authorial racial identity is hard to accept. While it is true that certain works by African Americans clearly revise one another, to find Harriet Beecher Stowe's novels in formal conversation with slave narratives is not to claim her as an author of African American literature. We assume that the shared race of black authors provides the basis for the significance of these formal revisions.[10]

Of course, texts of diverse authorship can and should be grouped together to reveal the intricate network of influence moving both directions across the color line. In addition to Kelley's novels, the Schomburg Library series includes both *A Biografy of the Slav Who Whipt Her Mistres and Gand Her Fredom*, written by the white Cornelius Larison in his idiosyncratic "reformed" spelling and dictated by the former slave and prizefighter Silvia DuBois, who claimed to be 122 years old when her narrative was composed, and *A Voice from the South*, a black feminist appeal by Anna Julia Cooper, who held a master's degree in mathematics and later received a PhD from the Sorbonne. While grouping these divergent texts together may inspire rich and productive scholarship, the presentation of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kelley, DuBois, and Cooper as the literary ancestors of later generations of black women writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison, enfolds these writers into a tradition based on the assumption of their shared racial identity (Gates xvii). Unsurprisingly, when apprised of my findings on Kelley's racial identity, Gates announced that her novels would be withdrawn from the Schomburg series, confirming the seemingly obvious yet significantly muted primacy of authorial race in the formation of the series.[11]

Despite the appeal of criticism that locates the "difference" of black literature in the works themselves, John Guillory reminds us that the recognition of formerly excluded literature necessarily hinges on authors instead. Though "the first wave of theory called into question such categories as that of the author," Guillory notes that "the author returns in the critique of the canon, not as the genius, but as the representative of a social identity" (10). So, to reframe a "first wave" question, what is a black author? Michel Foucault's account of the author as "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses" can be extended to reveal how the author functions as a principle for the regulation of racial categories (119). Along similar lines, Eversley points to the special role of the African American author as a representative of authentic racial experience, noting that this figure helps define the criteria and limits of blackness. She argues, "the modern emergence of interest in racial authenticity transforms the issue of what race a person or author belongs to into a question of what it takes to belong to that race" (xii). She continues: "The concept of an African American literary tradition is understood to produce an account of black racial experience that is somehow 'true'" (xiv). The representative blackness of African American authors lends truth to the racial account of their works and creates conventions around which real black expression can be measured.

Kelley's scholarly reception reveals not only a specific series of oversights in research but a more general reliance on authorial identity that serves to regulate, instead of complicate, our understanding of race and its workings in literary production. The breakdown of racial legibility in this case calls us to account for an unacknowledged reliance on race as a dependable means of categorization and brings into focus the challenge facing scholars of race and writing: to draw on the epistemological contributions in African American studies that have theorized the instability of race, while also affirming the field's central project of recovering, celebrating, and analyzing the writings of black people as a distinct tradition. This negotiation follows the model that Appiah considers "the classic dialectic of reaction to prejudice," that is, "on the one hand, a simple claim to equality, a denial of substantial difference; on the other, a claim to a special message" ("Uncompleted Argument" 25). In antiracist as well as feminist thought, the denial of difference sits uneasily alongside claims of exceptionality. Translating this dilemma into the terms of canon revision, Guillory asserts that the inability to apply theories that problematize identity categories to authors, our representatives of legible identity, "betrays an apparently unavoidable discrepancy between theory and practice, an incapacity as yet to translate theory into political practice *at the site of institutional practices*" (10). The reluctance to confront this problem in contemplating the black author, on whose racial authenticity our conception of African American literature depends, results in an uneven and contradictory sense of what we should know and teach about the production of black culture.

The collection and dissemination of literary works by authors of African descent remain vital projects to combat the centuries of racist suppression of this literature, though, as I have suggested, the collection of materials according to the genealogical identity of the author is not as straightforward a venture as

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

we seem to assume. Authorial identity is unstable ground, but for all its complications, it enables our concept of African American literature and thus provides a starting point for the important work that this tradition facilitates. Readings that locate blackness exclusively in the texts themselves still exhibit the tremendous influence that the author exercises over interpretation but too often bypass the complexities of this central figure, running the risk of naturalizing the link between identity and expression. The race of the author is an indispensable, indeed definitive, consideration in our current understanding of African American literature, and it is fruitfully unreliable. African American studies has long called for scholarship that understands *race* as a shifting term operating in historically specific ways as a signifier of inequality, but it has often proved difficult to apply this understanding to projects that aim to build and define identitarian traditions. This productive problematic coalesces in the author, and attention to the uses of this figure offers one way to reframe these politics in critical practice.

Notes

I would like to thank Michael T. Gilmore, Faith Smith, John Plotz, and Sari Edelstein for their comments on drafts of this essay.

1. *Megda* was published under the pseudonym Forget-Me-Not, but the author's picture is signed, "Yours very truly, Emma Dunham Kelley." *Four Girls at Cottage City*, published after her 1893 marriage, was issued under the last name Kelley-Hawkins. For the sake of consistency, I refer to this author simply as "Emma Dunham Kelley," the name by which she seems to have been known as a novelist, in the remainder of this essay, despite the fact that she marketed *Four Girls* under a hyphenated name and used her married name, Emma Hawkins, in her private life after that point. *Four Girls* was printed by the Continental Printing Company in Providence in 1895, three years earlier than the date used by the Schomburg Library and scholars since that reprint. Richard Noble, a rare-books librarian at the John Hay Library of Brown University, found a copy of this previously unknown first edition of *Four Girls at Cottage City*. I am grateful to him for bringing it to my attention.

2. Accurate biographical information on Kelley was first published in my 20 February 2005 article in the "Ideas" section of the *Boston Globe*, which the editors titled "Mistaken Identity." During the past two years, while this version of the essay has been under review, those original findings have been discussed in the media, on the Internet, and in other scholarly works and thus are no longer "totally unknown," as they were when I wrote this essay in 2005.

3. This biographical sketch is based on records housed at the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston, Massachusetts; the Providence Public Library in Rhode Island; and personal correspondence with Erika Henning-Dyson, Kelley's great-great-great-niece. For a detailed study of Kelley's family history, see Flynn.

4. Earle actually specialized in Christian moral reform literature, including titles such as *Handbook of Revivals for the Use of Winners of Souls*; *Must the Old Testament Go?*; and the sixteen-page tract *He's Coming To-morrow*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This fact suggests a new context for reading *Iola Leroy* alongside authors like Kelley and Stowe.

5. The significance of the town in Kelley's *Four Girls at Cottage City* as a Christian retreat is clear when this novel is compared to *Four Girls at Chautauqua* (1876), by Isabella Macdonald Alden (who used the pseudonym Pansy), a novel about a group of young friends at a similar religious vacation spot. This popular author may also have inspired Kelley to the floral nom de plume under which she published *Megda*. Joan Bryant brought Alden's novel to my attention.

6. Jacobson defines this period as the 1840s through 1924.

7. This information comes from Chris Chirokas, Kelley's first cousin three times removed.

8. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "nigger heaven" as simply "[t]he top gallery in a theatre or cinema." Peterson defines this area as seating reserved for "African Americans and the lower classes" (121).

9. I have suggested some of the issues surrounding national background and phenotype for newly white Americans in the 1890s, but this period was also a defining moment in public discourse on the boundaries of blackness, due in part to this same negotiation between visual and genealogical conceptions of race. Consider the case of Homer Plessy, whose appearance was so white as to necessitate the well-known arrangement of his arrest on a whites-only railroad car in 1892. In 1896, the Supreme Court declared that despite his white appearance, ultimately his family history, or "black blood," determined his race for the purposes of social and political categorization under jim crow.

10. Theodore Mason raises a similar question in response to the stated organization of *The Norton Anthology*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of African American Literature, edited by Gates and Nellie McKay, around "instances of tropological revision" while the project also aims to comprehensively collect "two centuries of imaginative writing in English by persons of African descent." Mason notes a "fissure in the coherence of the principles." He explains: "There are (at least) two conditions that must be met in order to qualify for inclusion, one of which is literary, the other 'demographic.' So one might wonder whether this is principally an anthology of literature by African Americans or principally an anthology conforming to principles defined by literary practice. In each of these instances, and many others, the fundamental question is the coherence of the taxonomy and the conflicts among the hermeneutical and critical understandings that license the taxonomy in question" (193).

11. "'I am persuaded she was not black, and I welcome the finding,' said Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard's chairman of African and African-American studies and the general editor of the Schomburg series. 'In the next edition we will delete her works'" (Mehegan 1).

Works Cited

Alden, Isabella Macdonald. *Four Girls at Chautauqua*. 1876. Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004.

Appiah, Anthony. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.

———. "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 21–37.

Bauer, Dale M. "Master Thoughts." *White Scholars / African American Texts*. Ed. Lisa A. Long. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005. 186–97.

Chirokas, Chris. Letter to the author. 3 Apr. 2005.

Christian, Barbara. Introduction. *The Hazeley Family*. By A. E. Johnson. Schomburg Lib. of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. xxvii–xxxvii.

Cromwell, Adelaide M. *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750–1950*. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1994.

duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Eversley, Shelly. *The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*. Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Flynn, Katherine E. "A Case of Mistaken Racial Identity: Finding Emma Dunham (née Kelley) Hawkins." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 94 (2006): 5–22.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984. 101–20.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Foreword: In Her Own Write." Kelley, *Four Girls* vii–xxii.

Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.

Henning-Dyson, Erika. Letter to the author. 29 Mar. 2005.

———. Letter to the author. 16 Apr. 2005.

Hite, Molly. Introduction. Kelley, *Megda* xxvii–xxxvii.

Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Jackson, Holly. "Mistaken Identity." *Boston Globe* 20 Feb. 2005: D1+.

Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.

Kelley, Emma Dunham. *Four Girls at Cottage City*. Schomburg Lib. of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

———. *Megda*. Schomburg Lib. of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Logan, Rayford W. *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*. New York: Collier, 1965.

Mason, Theodore O., Jr. "The African-American Anthology: Mapping the Territory, Taking the National Census, Building the Museum." *American Literary History* 10.1 (1998): 185–98.

Matthews, Victoria Earle. "The Value of Race Literature." 1895. *Massachusetts Review* 27.2 (1986): 169–91.

McDowell, Deborah E. *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

———. Introduction. Kelley, *Four Girls* xxvii–xxxviii.

Mehegan, David. "Correcting a Case of Mistaken Identity." *Boston Globe* 5 Mar. 2005: C1+.

"Nigger heaven." Def. 6c. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

Peterson, Carla L. "New Negro Modernity: Worldliness and Interiority in the Novels of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins." *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875–1945*. Ed. Peterson, Ann L. Ardis, and Leslie W. Lewis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003. 111–29.

Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

———. *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Whiteman, Maxwell. *A Century of Fiction by American Negroes, 1853–1952: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Philadelphia: Saifer, 1955.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.3.728 Published online by Cambridge University Press