

Crafts of Memory



LOVE, LIBERATION,
AND ESCAPING SLAVERY
WILLIAM AND ELLEN CRAFT
IN CULTURAL MEMORY

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Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015. 136 pp., \$54.95.

Barbara McCaskill's study of the life and work of William and Ellen Craft retells a celebrated story, but one that, as she persuasively argues, has been denied extensive and nuanced scholarly treatment precisely because of the sensational details at its core. McCaskill aims to bring into public memory important elements of the Crafts' experience as escaped slaves and activists

that have proven unassimilable within nineteenth- and twentieth-century political, pedagogical, and aesthetic paradigms. Piecing together a wide range of archival materials, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* “decod[es] observations and reminiscences of both American and European allies and detractors in order to separate these perspectives and expectations from the possible aspirations, motivations, and opinions of the couple themselves” (11-12). As a result of her exemplary efforts, McCaskill has given us not only our richest account of the Crafts’ remarkable lives but also made a significant contribution to African American print culture broadly construed.

Seeking to move beyond “English-speaking audiences’ assumptions about how African peoples functioned in bondage” and expectations for those who gained freedom (5), McCaskill positions her study within the African American literary and cultural recovery and revisionary work of the last fifty years. Each of the book’s four chapters is devoted to “extraordinary moments of the Crafts’ public lives of service and activism” (9). Chapter one pieces together the narrative of the Crafts’ brilliant escape from Macon, Georgia, to Philadelphia, during which they journeyed by land and sea, the light-skinned Ellen disguised as an invalid slave holder and William as her man servant. McCaskill’s account of the escape proceeds as a reading of multiple tellings that considers gaps in the Crafts’ own account and the specific emphases of contemporaneous versions. These critical reflections, even those that must remain in part speculative due to a lack of extant archival material, are carefully informed by historical and literary scholarship. For example, McCaskill considers the rhetorical dynamics influencing differing racial representations of the mixed-race couple. Chapter two traces how the Crafts were received and integrated into the vibrant abolitionist milieu of Boston, where they made valuable friends and from where the regional and transatlantic circulation of their escape story began in earnest. McCaskill charts how, as they began their lives beyond slavery, the Crafts had to negotiate “the good intentions of northern abolitionists” and the couple’s “willfulness and determination to chart their own direction in life” (42). Welcome attention is given here to the production of Ellen Crafts’ daguerreotype in the guise of her escape, cross-dressed as male and passing for white, an image, McCaskill notes, that unsettled “assumptions about the fixity of gender, race, normalcy, and class” as surely as it provided rhetorically potent abolitionist publicity. Chapter three concludes by recounting the Crafts’ second flight from Boston to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1850 (and shortly thereafter, to England), orchestrated by the Boston Vigilance Committee after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law.

In England, settling once again into a welcoming abolitionist community, the Crafts produced the memoir, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom*, which McCaskill argues offers an important lens on the alliances and tensions within transatlantic abolitionist networks. Chapter three offers a careful contextual reading of the memoir, considering how its publication history was bound up with the Crafts’ attempts to secure stability through their family. Drawing on Beth A. McCoy’s analysis of the “paratext” of African American print, which

complicates Gerard Genette's original, McCaskill attends to related, ephemeral documents to highlight multiple influences in the composition of the memoir, and to begin sketching its reception history in England. McCaskill calls the book "no boilerplate slave's story," and suggests that it was resistant "to easy comparisons to other printed slave narratives" (57). These claims rest primarily on the memoir's nonconformity to the conventions of the heroic, masculine fugitive narrative and its alternative highlighting of "connection, collaboration, and partnership" (56-57). This chapter offers the most sustained analysis of the print record, turning to a number of lesser-known slave narratives, and multiple British and U.S. journalistic sources including the *American Antislavery Standard*, the *Anti-Slavery Bulletin*, the *Newcastle Courant*, and the *Bristol Mercury*. While chapter three offers this instructive retelling of the more widely known details of the Crafts' antebellum life and work, chapter four, which recounts the Crafts' return to the United States and subsequent work as reformers during Reconstruction, offers the most important addition to the abiding cultural memory of the Crafts, detailing as it does the less often studied years of the Crafts' lives. At the center of this chapter are the Crafts' founding of the Woodville Cooperative Farm School in Georgia and the libel case William Craft lodged against an alliance of vindictive Georgians and Bostonians accusing him publicly of financial impropriety.

McCaskill's insistence on retelling the Crafts' story through an intertextual analysis of an expanded archive vividly illustrates Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein's claim that the study of early African American print can productively destabilize the founding categories of African American literature as a field of study. To be sure, though McCaskill is attentive to "print's role in the process of racialization," she is also unequivocally committed to exploring "the possibility that early African American print culture might unmake identity as plausibly as make it." She thus takes up the challenge of writing African American cultural history "with recourse to moments where identity diffuses as much as moments where identity consolidates," as Cohen and Stein put it. McCaskill has a keen eye for such moments of making and unmaking, particularly in her attention to the understudied transatlantic trajectory of the Crafts' story, in her unsettling of masculinist renderings of William as a heroic fugitive, and in her reading the print record against the grain in order to restore Ellen's prominence in the couple's public life and in the shaping of their reputation.

Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery brings several remarkable documents into the print record and thus extends what we know about the Crafts. As importantly, it models an expansive and creative approach to archival work. An open letter to President Millard Fillmore, for example, written by the Crafts' former owner, Robert Collins, and published in the *New York Herald* in November 1850, demonstrates the rhetorical force available to slave owners in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law (63). Consideration of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court case filed for William Craft's libel case likewise illuminates the rhetorical skill of the Crafts, the faithfulness of abolitionist friends who testified and advocated on their behalf, and the "limitations of the

politics of respectability as a blunting force against racial bigotry” (83).

Among the most engaging of McCaskill’s readings is her analysis of Lydia Maria Child’s Unionist stage rendering of the Crafts’ story, *Stars and Stripes: A Melo-Drama* (1855), which, as McCaskill argues, confines Ellen’s character within the conventions of the sexually imperiled female slave, politically salient perhaps but contrary to Ellen’s own account of her experience and motivation for hazarding escape. In some instances, McCaskill moves more quickly through these texts than one might wish. For example, William Wells Brown’s depiction of the Crafts in *Clotel* (1853) receives only a brief mention, as does the biographical sketch in abolitionist William Still’s landmark history, *The Underground Railroad* (1872). Analysis of Child’s account of the Crafts, included in her 1865 Reconstruction reader, *The Freedmen’s Book*, seems similarly curtailed. These limitations, even if we judge them as such, hardly detract from McCaskill’s feat of memory work, an accomplishment that will undoubtedly reframe critical conversations about William and Ellen Craft for years to come.

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Michael Stancliff is associate professor of English at Arizona State University where he teaches courses in nineteenth-century American literature, African American literature, rhetoric, and composition. He is the author of *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: African American Reform Literature and the Rise of a Modern Nation State*.