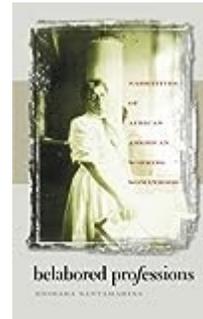


**Xiomara Santamarina.** *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Women.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 240 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5648-2.



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## The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

In *Belabored Professions*, Xiomara Santamarina makes use of the narratives of four African-American women to explore the importance of paid labor in their lives and, by extension, in the lives of most African American women in the nineteenth century. *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* details the experience of Truth, who is perhaps best remembered for her abolitionist speeches, as a domestic servant in the northern United States. Harriet Wilson, the author of the autobiographical novel *Our Nig*, also worked as a menial laborer before becoming a writer. The authors of the remaining two narratives worked in what might be considered more skilled occupations: Eliza Potter was a hairdresser in Cincinnati, and Elizabeth Keckley was a dressmaker for Washington's elite, including both Varina Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln. Each of these four women turned the "ordinary" experiences of paid employment into something more by taking the extraordinary step of writing about their lives as laborers.

In her study, Santamarina sets out to explore the "representational possibilities" of black women's paid labor as portrayed in these four narratives (p. x). Ultimately, she argues that each of these women found a measure

of dignity and independence through her paid work. In their narratives, these women were "publicizing, rather than apologizing for, the value of their often disparaged and invisible work" (p. 22).

Santamarina's conclusions are based largely on a literary analysis of the narratives, as the play on the word "professions" might suggest. Interestingly, this means that the reader tends to learn more about the women's work as authors than about their paid labor as servants, seamstresses, or hairdressers. Santamarina explains in her discussion of Eliza Potter that the actual material and tasks of hairdressing "do not make much of an appearance in the text" (p. 116). Certainly, in this analysis the focus is on the meaning assigned to work in their writings, rather than the work assigned to these women in their daily lives. There is thus little discussion of the general labor expectations of African American women, or what talents or skill sets they may have developed as paid laborers. Nor is there a clear indication of whether the work that these four women did was typical. While readers might surmise that domestic service was fairly common for African American women, it is not made clear

how frequently black women made their livings as either hairdressers or fashionable dressmakers.

The presentation of these narratives as literary representations meant to demonstrate the nobility of the author's labor, begs the question of whom these texts were meant to convince. The circulation of Elizabeth Keckley's work may have been the most widespread, although it tended to bring her scorn rather than acceptance. Eliza Potter's work was reviewed by the newspapers of Cincinnati, but there is no indication that the readership extended beyond this community. Santamarina notes that Harriet Wilson authored *Our Nig* to support herself and her child (p. 68). Clearly then, finding an audience to purchase her book would have been paramount to achieving this goal. Santamarina, however, seems to dismiss the work of scholars such as Claudia Tate and Patricia Wald who have suggested that the black audience to whom Wilson appealed lacked the funds or even the numbers to make her novel profitable (p. 65). While Santamarina contests the meaning implicit in the limitations of audience, the reader is still left to wonder who actually bought these narratives. A limited audience does not detract from the current interpretative importance of these works; but a discussion of this issue would add another dimension to the struggles these women faced in the valuation (and validation) of their labor.

While the discussion of the contemporary audience is somewhat limited, Santamarina does tackle the historical audience for these texts, asserting that historians have virtually ignored the labor of African American women in favor of a focus on middle-class reform activities. She argues that "with the exception of an occasional story of a female slave who escapes from slavery, black working women and their labors remain largely invisible" (p. 13). The suggestion is that both contemporaries and historians have focused on the "abolitionist-reform discourse," at the expense of discussing and valuing African American women who earned their living through paid employment. This seems to set up an overly adversarial opposition. It is true that despite a number of fine works on the labor of African American women, both free and enslaved, much still needs to be done on this subject.<sup>[1]</sup> But the limited coverage has not been created as a result of studies of African American women's involvement in abolitionist and reform activities, which also offers ample room for more study. In fact, these two elements, paid labor and the implications of slavery and abolition, may have coexisted in the lives of many antebellum African American women.

In her discussion of *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* Santamarina addresses this co-mingling of reform and labor narratives. Truth's amanuensis for this work was the white abolitionist Olive Gilbert. The discussion of this "Conflicted Collaboration" is perhaps the least convincing segment of this study. Santamarina suggests an oppositional dialogue within this narrative in which the reforming tones of Gilbert are undermined by the additions of Truth. Yet since the evidence presented appears to be written largely in the third person (and presumably all through the pen of Gilbert), the attribution of tone to one collaborator or the other seems rather arbitrary (pp. 43-56). While these women almost certainly had different world views, trying to reconstruct them out of this text is not only difficult, but suggests a disregard for the cooperation that could and did exist between advocates of labor and reform.

Aware of the limited sources that provide access to the experiences of nineteenth-century African American women in their own words, I frequently found myself wanting something more or different from *Belabored Professions*. In particular, I wanted more historical context, to know more about both the ordinary and the extraordinary elements of these women's lives. I wanted to know, through the words of these women, what it was like for an African American woman to labor day to day as a domestic servant, seamstress, or hairdresser. I also wanted to know what about their skills or talents made these particular women extraordinary. Many women, for example, toiled as seamstresses; what skills or talents did Elizabeth Keckley possess that allowed her to attain first freedom and then a degree of fame? How did these women's experiences compare not only to each other, but to the millions of other laboring women who lacked the means to tell their stories? Santamarina's work is at its best when she uses these texts to illuminate both the experiences of these women, and their interaction with the broader community. The limited contextualization, however, will reduce the usefulness of this text for the general reader. Further, the extensive use of literary jargon—discursive inheritances, hermeneutic modeling, and polemic deployments—will render this study virtually inaccessible to most undergraduate audiences.

But it is perhaps unfair to ask this text to fulfill all of my desires for an accessible biographical study of black women workers, placing them in the broader context of the nineteenth-century social, political and economic landscape. Santamarina, after all, does not promise to provide a historical context, but rather to put these narratives in their "discursive moment" (p. 28). While this

study often left me with more questions than answers, it inspires me to approach the original narratives with a renewed sensitivity to what the paid labor of these women represented to themselves and the community. In asking us to more carefully question the ordinary (laboring) activities of these extraordinary women, this study is a success.

Note

[1]. See for example, Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985); and Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

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