

Article

Radical Interiors: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* and Literary Rebellion in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This article examines Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* (1868) to explore how memoirs written by Black women become literary spaces of rebellion. Writing from within elite white domestic interiors as a dressmaker and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley challenges the racialized structures that sought to confine Black women to silence, labor, and invisibility. Using a Black feminist literary methodology grounded in close reading, historical contextualization, and the concepts of radical interiority and Reflexive Identity Narration (RIN), this article analyzes how Keckley converts domestic labor, witnessing, and narrative self-definition into acts of insurgent authorship. The analysis demonstrates that Keckley's narrative exposes the contradictions of white domesticity, asserts Black women's intellectual and emotional autonomy, and transforms the domestic interior into a site of political critique. By claiming narrative authority and strategically shaping what is revealed and withheld, Keckley enacts a form of rebellion rooted in self-authorship and witnessing. This article concludes that *Behind the Scenes* offers an early blueprint for Black feminist rebellion, expanding conventional structures of the genre of slave narratives.

Keywords: African American literature; rebellion; revolution; Black women's autobiography; Elizabeth Keckley; domestic labor; interiority; life writing; Black feminist criticism

1. Introduction

Rebellion and revolution are integral parts of the African American literary tradition, shaping genres from the antebellum narratives of the enslaved to twenty-first-century speculative fiction. While rebellion has often been theorized through public, collective, and overt acts of resistance, African American literature has long articulated parallel modes of insurgency enacted through intimate, interior, and domestic spaces. These quieter forms of revolt, though less studied, are equally central to how Black writers transform the conditions of their lives into sites of critical reimagining and political intervention. Yet scholarship on rebellion and revolution in Black literature frequently privileges spectacular forms of resistance—insurrections, protests, collective uprisings—while overlooking the ways in which Black women's everyday interior life writing constituted its own mode of insurgent practice, particularly in the nineteenth century.

This article foregrounds that overlooked tradition by examining the autobiographical writings of Elizabeth Keckley. Writing from within elite white domestic interiors as dressmaker and confidante to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley defied the expectation that Black women's experiences—especially within intimate labor—should remain unseen, unrecorded, or narratively disciplined by white respectability. Instead, her memoir mobilizes domestic labor, interiority, observation, and narrative authority as forms of literary



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rebellion. Keckley deploys authorship itself as a radical act: she reclaims the interior self and transforms her proximity to whiteness into a critical vantage point from which to expose the racialized contradictions of American domesticity.

It is important to acknowledge that scholarship on the interior life writing of nineteenth-century Black women is neither absent nor thin. The robust critical literature on Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) has illuminated how Black women writers employed sentimental conventions, strategic withholding, and personal testimony as tools of resistance. The intervention this article makes addresses a more specific gap: despite the richness of this wider field, Elizabeth Keckley's memoir has not received the sustained theoretical attention it warrants as a postbellum text operating under a fundamentally different rhetorical situation than its antebellum predecessors. Keckley is writing after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, after the assassination of Lincoln, and in the immediate aftermath of what contemporaries called the "Old Clothes Scandal"—the disastrous public attempt by Mary Todd Lincoln to sell her wardrobe through New York agents, a spectacle that drew fierce criticism not only of Mrs. Lincoln but, by extension, of Keckley herself. The memoir was written, in significant part, as an act of self-defense and public reframing. As Lisa Shawn Hogan argues, *Behind the Scenes* functioned as "a rhetoric of intimate disclosure that violated Victorian-era conceptions of gender, class, and race" (Hogan 2013, p. 406). Understanding the memoir's genesis in this specific historical crisis is essential to reading its narrative strategies correctly.

By narrating her life, Keckley converts embodied knowledge—laboring hands, traveling bodies, witnessing eyes—into a critique that can be read as political. That act of witnessing is itself a recognized mode of Black autobiographical authority. As Joycelyn K. Moody observes, drawing on Trudier Harris, "witnessing is the guiding motivation and creative force behind African American autobiographical writings," and it is through this insistence on witnessing that African American life writing has persistently transformed private experience into collective testimony and political critique (Moody 2022, p. 10). Keckley's memoir belongs squarely within this tradition, converting her intimate proximity to white power into a sustained act of documented witness. Her memoir enacts what I define as Reflexive Identity Narration (RIN), an authorial strategy through which the self is articulated reflexively—through selective disclosure, strategic emphasis, and interpretive control over the voices and actions of others—rather than through direct self-declaration or the linear testimony of personal trauma. RIN is a deliberate methodological response to the specific conditions of postbellum Black women's life writing, in which, as Saidiya Hartman has argued, "emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (Hartman 1997, pp. 6–7). Within that constrained field of possibility, the direct assertion of Black interiority remained a fraught and potentially costly act. RIN provides the mechanism through which Keckley asserts herself—obliquely, reflexively, and without surrendering authorial control.

The narrative choices convert subjective experience into meaningful action by unsettling the racial–sexual hierarchy foundational to nineteenth-century American life. The purpose of this article is to illuminate how Keckley's life writing transforms theories of rebellion and revolution into the lived, textual, and affective practices that constitute early Black feminist praxis. Her work expands the meaning of rebellion beyond insurrectionary action and into the intimate terrain of self-making, witnessing, boundary-setting, and narrative exposure. In centering the domestic interior as a battleground for resistance, her memoir reveals life writing as a critical site of Black women's revolutionary work.

By analyzing Keckley's memoir through a Black feminist literary framework that draws on Hartman's theorization of postbellum self-making, Darlene Clark Hine's culture

of dissemblance, and Sarah Blackwood's work on Black visual culture and the counter-gaze, this article situates Keckley within a longer continuum of African American literary rebellion and recovers her narratives as an essential early contribution to Black women's revolutionary thought. In doing so, it offers a more expansive understanding of how African American literature galvanizes and transforms rebellion into meaningful action, not only through public declarations of resistance but also through the radical reclamation of interior life.

2. *Behind the Scenes* and the Disruption of Antebellum Narrative Convention

Keckley's memoir recounts her journey from enslaved person to sought-after seamstress and confidante to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Through her work, she gained unparalleled access to elite white society, documenting the intricacies of her relationships and the power dynamics at play. While her work includes reflections on her life as an enslaved person and her professional successes, it places significant emphasis on her proximity to white political elites—particularly the Lincolns—offering a unique lens into the social and racial tensions of the time. Her skills and labor not only provided Mary Todd Lincoln with a sense of stability and support during turbulent times but also sustained Lincoln during her time of need, underscoring how Keckley's work directly benefited her employer. Yet despite Keckley's invaluable contributions, Mary Todd Lincoln never advocated for the rights of Black women, even as she relied on and prospered from Keckley's service. This relationship epitomizes a recurring historical pattern in which Black women's labor uplifts white women, while their own struggles for recognition and justice are overlooked or dismissed.

Arguably, one learns more about Keckley through the knowledge she gained from those around her rather than what she directly shares of her own life. A literary analysis of Keckley's respective "standpoint" allows for the production of "new meaning." This new meaning and consciousness emerge from racial negotiations through relations, observation, critical thought, and voice, legitimizing the Black experience without direct authentication from a white authority. In effect, her choice of style in narrating autobiography allows a unique reading of the genre itself.

To understand what Keckley's memoir does, it is useful to begin with the established critical frameworks that it both engages and exceeds. James Olney's influential taxonomy of conventions governing narratives of the enslaved identified a "master outline" so early and firmly established that they had acquired the force of genre law: a white authenticating voice that testifies to the truth of the writer's story, a narrative specifying place of birth and parentage, an account of the cruelties endured, a description of escape, and a reflective conclusion. Olney's framework has been foundational to the study of this tradition (Olney 1984, p. 50). Yet, as subsequent scholars have recognized, it was built primarily on antebellum male narratives—most centrally Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*—and therefore does not adequately account for the formal innovations of postbellum women's life writing. Frances Smith Foster has argued that postbellum narratives of the formerly enslaved operated with a fundamentally different purpose from their antebellum predecessors: where antebellum writers sought to move readers toward action on the question of abolition, postbellum writers were tasked with convincing their readers that the formerly enslaved were capable of assuming the responsibilities of freedom (Foster 1993, pp. 118–19). This shift in rhetorical situation is crucial for reading Keckley. She is writing to assert the intellectual, moral, and social authority of a free Black woman in a public sphere that remained deeply hostile to that claim. Andréa N. Williams further contextualizes this postbellum rhetorical situation, observing that many postbellum autobiographers enacted

a “self-effacing posture, often insisting that friends persuaded them to write” as a way of managing the potential accusation of egotism or impropriety (Williams 2022, p. 87). Keckley’s preface performs exactly this gesture, presenting the memoir as written at the urging of others—a framing that, far from diminishing her authorial agency, demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the demands her white readership would bring to a text by a formerly enslaved Black woman.

William L. Andrews identifies a deeper scholarly problem that contextualizes this critical gap: critics have “almost entirely ignored or condescendingly dismissed” postbellum slave narratives from serious scholarly consideration “in spite of the fact that the slave narrative continued to dominate Afro-American autobiography for seventy years, from the end of the Civil War until well into the 1920s” (Andrews 1989, pp. 14–15). The cause, Andrews argues, is precisely the habit of treating antebellum slave narrative conventions as the standard against which postbellum texts are measured and found wanting. Neither Keckley nor Douglass, he notes, “was willing to be bound to a prior standard or tradition”—and reading them as though they should have been produces a fundamentally distorted account of their authorial intentions and achievements. This article’s framework of RIN is designed, in part, to correct that distortion: to offer a vocabulary for what Keckley is doing on her own postbellum terms, terms that antebellum conventions cannot adequately name.

Janet Neary, in the most sustained recent treatment of Keckley’s memoir, argues that Keckley “rejects the racial protocols of conventional slave narration, radicalizing the form” and that her “1868 conjugation of the slave-narrative form illustrates the continuation of a particular kind of racial vision in the postbellum period and challenges that vision by skewering the authenticity protocols of the genre” (Neary 2014, p. 558). This article extends Neary’s foundational observation by identifying the specific literary mechanism through which that challenge is mounted: Reflexive Identity Narration. Where Neary describes the what of Keckley’s departure from convention—what she calls a “calculated reversal” (Neary 2014, p. 557) that centers white voices and bodies rather than Black suffering—RIN names and theorizes the how and why of that reversal, providing an analytical framework that can be applied consistently across the memoir’s shifting narrative situations.

To explain why such a framework is necessary, it is worth situating Keckley’s memoir within the specific conditions of postbellum Black life writing identified by Hartman (1997, p. 6). Hartman argues that emancipation produced not liberation but a “burdened individuality”—a condition in which freedom was real but constrained, in which self-possession did not liberate the formerly enslaved “but rather sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract and the collar with a guilty conscience.” The demand placed on newly freed Black people to perform legibility—to demonstrate, for white audiences, that they were responsible, morally upright, and productively absorbed into the social order—was itself a new form of constraint on Black self-expression. Within this context, the direct assertion of Black interiority was a potentially costly political act. RIN provides Keckley the means to assert herself while managing that risk: by centering the voices of white elites, she appears to comply with the demand for Black transparency even as she structures the reader’s interpretation of those voices in ways that consistently elevate her own authority.

This dynamic is further illuminated by Darlene Clark Hine’s (1989, p. 912) theorization of the “culture of dissemblance”—the practice through which Black women created “the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” Hine argues that the threat of sexual violence and economic exploitation made such dissemblance a collectively developed form of resistance: “Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often

one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (Darlene Clark Hine 1989, p. 915). Hine places Keckley’s memoir directly within this tradition, noting that virtually every known nineteenth-century female narrative of the enslaved engages with the threat of rape, and that Keckley’s compressed, controlled account of her own sexual violation is exemplary of this strategic silence (Darlene Clark Hine 1989, p. 912). The culture of dissemblance is the historical and social practice; RIN is the literary mechanism through which Keckley deploys it in her memoir.

Although Keckley adheres to some aspects of the established genre—she specifies a place of birth, recounts cruelties endured and narrates her path to freedom—she departs from the antebellum template in ways that are systematic. She does not dwell on her life as an enslaved person; she authenticates herself rather than relying on a white person to do so; and she maintains a strong perspective as an observer in intimate spaces. Crucially, her narrative demonstrates what Hartman (1997, p. 8) calls “acts of defiance conducted under the cover of nonsense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence”—performances that “at the level of appearance... differed little” from compliance, but that “at the level of effect... diverged radically.” RIN is exactly this kind of performance: it looks like deference to white authority and looks like a memoir about Mary Todd Lincoln; at the level of effect, it is a sustained exercise of narrative sovereignty by a Black woman writing in a hostile public sphere.

Ultimately, Keckley participates in what I term Reflexive Identity Narration (RIN). Particular to Keckley’s memoir is empowerment through observation and construction of her ideas of self via the voices of others. Keckley self-empowers by actively choosing what readers encounter in relation to how others have spoken about her character. Her positionality as a reporter reveals that by using the voices of elite families such as the Lincolns—or those considered socially superior because of their whiteness, such as the Garlands (the family that once owned her)—she is able to pull herself from the margins and into the center. Such narration is employed when a marginalized writer builds their identity through the narration of the thoughts, feelings, voices, and motives of the people around them, using social observation and encounters rather than through narration of oneself and one’s motives. This style makes the function of the literary genre of autobiography contradictory to its perceived purposes: it is an account of what she tells you concerning others’ perceptions of her and the overall construction of herself in relation to those she encounters. Steve Criniti (2008, p. 321) captures this dimension of Keckley’s project when he observes that “interiority is a result of writing the exterior text”—that through the act of autobiography, Keckley controls not only the creation of the narrative dress, but the creation of the self beneath it as well. In this sense, RIN constructs that self through the management of others’ voices.

Her strategy of reflexive identity narration reveals the complex negotiations required of her. Keckley’s use of RIN not only allows her to assert her voice but also highlights how Black women’s contributions, though essential, were often validated only through white-centered perspectives. Most importantly, RIN serves as a metaphorical safe space for her to assert her humanity, even in hostile environments.

Her stylistic reversal—placing white people at the forefront of her narrative—takes the expected attention away from Black bodies damaged by the system of slavery and puts the attention on the actions and words of white people complicit in the system that oppresses them. In effect, this action places the burden of humanization on the white people instead of the enslaved or formerly enslaved person. Neary (2014, p. 557) reads this as “a calculated reversal” of the conventions of the antebellum narrative; my argument is that RIN is the sustained literary form through which that reversal is executed and maintained across the

full length of the memoir. In this reframing, Keckley can reclaim agency in a world that sought to silence her and subtly assert her worth.

Jennifer Fleischner (1996, p. 53) observes that “Keckley seems to reject the ‘Otherness’ that has been projected onto the slave woman by projecting it back onto the figure of the mistress, while at the same time, in light of the two women’s interdependent relationship, to retain the phantom presence of the Other in her conception of herself.” In other words, although Keckley announces that she is attempting to clear Mrs. Lincoln’s name and place her in a better light, the act of exposing Mrs. Lincoln’s financial instability, impulsiveness, and dependency ultimately places Keckley in a better light by contrast. Lincoln becomes the “Other” while Keckley emerges as selfless, thoughtful, astute, and composed—qualities rarely attributed to a formerly enslaved Black woman during that period.

bell hooks (2015, p. 116) insists that “the gaze” for colonized Black people has been a site of resistance: “Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional.” Keckley enacts this gaze throughout her memoir, working simultaneously to document and oppose. She uses the gaze that the “other” has trained on her to look back and construct her sense of self, confronting negative or stereotypical attributes by redirecting attention to the behavior of those who projected them. Sarah Blackwood (2014, p. 44) extends this analysis by arguing that Black writers’ attention to “notions of vision, sight, and the gaze in their texts shifts our attention from objects to actions, from stability to movement, from representation to practice.” RIN is precisely this shift—from being the object of others’ gaze to being the governing subject who controls what is seen and how it is interpreted. As Sarah Blackwood (2014, p. 57) notes of the Black domestic observer, “no one could prevent us making good use of our eyes”—and in the domestic interior of the White House, Keckley’s eyes gather everything.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000, p. 11) term, the “outsider-within,” most aptly describes this gained knowledge and insight, which stems from Keckley’s positionality in relation to Mrs. Lincoln.¹ This social location gives way to a unique Black woman’s perspective, shaped by placement in domestic capacities in proximity to white people. Foster (1993, p. 16) observes that Black American women writers “appropriate [d] the English literary tradition to reveal, to interpret, to challenge, and to change perceptions of themselves and the world in which they found themselves.” Keckley’s approach exemplifies this challenge to how Black female consciousness is revealed in a postbellum autobiography outside normalized conventions. Her narration supports the fact that she is empowered by her proximity to the White House—specifically to Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln—because it gives her a means to establish a rebellious gaze and to socially analyze white political elites from a place she considers privileged due to such intimate access.

Even though her power as a working-class Black woman in the 1800s was actually quite limited, it is in her power as a dominated subject to assert a sense of agency by claiming awareness in a marginalized capacity and distinguishing these looking relations among her white subjects. She learned as an enslaved person to interrogate white actions and authority silently, to simply watch if possible, and to accept them. As a free woman she is in a position to learn about white people and interrogate their actions without immediately being admonished by anyone for doing so. Her profession as a highly sought-after dressmaker attracts elite white women to her and allows a safe space for them to unpack their troubles in her presence. The gaze becomes even more critical because her change in status—from enslaved person to free woman, to confidante in high office—was out of the norm. In being allowed access to the Lincolns’ personal sphere, her consciousness was impacted because she had the power to characterize white elitists as she wished, based on what they have shown and shared with her.

What is evident throughout *Behind the Scenes* is that Keckley possesses a fully formed consciousness from the first page, one shaped by decades of observation, labor, and survival under the conditions of enslavement and its aftermath. The reader's challenge is learning to recognize it because Keckley has chosen not to display it directly. RIN is the strategy through which that consciousness operates: not by announcing itself, but by governing what the reader sees, whose words carry weight, and whose judgment the narrative quietly authorizes. To read Keckley well is to read reflexively, following the architecture of her narration rather than only its surface declarations. The sections that follow trace this architecture across three distinct phases of the memoir: Keckley's pre-White House life, in which direct interiority establishes the self that RIN will later protect; her years in the Lincoln household, in which RIN operates at its fullest extension; and her separation from Mrs. Lincoln, in which the accumulated authority of RIN becomes legible as exactly that, authority that is deliberate, complete, and entirely her own.

3. Labor, Interiority, and Autonomy Before the White House

In the memoir's opening chapters—covering the enslaved portion of her life—Keckley does not employ reflexive identity narration and the voices of others to position and construct aspects of self. Instead, in fewer than thirty pages, she sums up her life as an enslaved person in fragmented events and experiences that provide insight into who she was before her consciousness became informed by that of others. This can be seen through her directly stating her value as a laborer, as opposed to providing statements from white people who relay her worth to the reader. For example, while selling her services as a seamstress, Keckley tells her readers: "I was working so hard that others might live in comparative comfort and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance" (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 17).

She is astutely aware that her labor not only provides the income that sustains the Garland family but also their entry to higher social circles that she herself cannot naturally access because of her Black skin. Her labor and sense of self are inseparable, not isolated subjects. [Xiomara Santamarina](#) (2005, p. 140), author of *Belabored Professions*, notes that "Work, for Keckley, was not simply about the material conditions of production, but more importantly about the emotions of respect and attachment that emerged from her creation of social value." As [Steve Criniti](#) (2008, p. 321) elaborates, Keckley's three-fold function as dressmaker—as self-made woman, as maker of Mary Todd Lincoln, and as authoress of her own story—allows her to exercise "an almost unprecedented power and control over herself and the inhabitants of the most famous and important house in the country." Keckley's labor is not merely economic; it is the material ground from which her authorial self-construction proceeds.

Her pre-White House narrative is marked by an interiority that is direct and unmediated. In narrating her struggle for freedom, Keckley allows the reader access to the inner workings of her mind in the form of questions and statements that show self-determination and agency. When she begins to contemplate freedom not only for herself but for her son, she questions: "Why should my son be held in slavery? [...] Must the life-current of one race bind the other race in chains as strong and enduring as if there had been no Anglo-Saxon taint?" (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 18). Keckley claims interiority directly here, something the conditions of her postbellum narrative will require her to claim more obliquely. This contrast is itself a narrative strategy: the reader who understands Keckley's direct voice in these early chapters will recognize, later, that the centering of white voices through RIN is not submission but deliberate choice.

Keckley's choice to omit certain painful moments from her life—most notably, her compressed, almost parenthetical account of her rape—does not diminish the depth of

her story. Instead, it underscores her autonomy in shaping her narrative. She tells us only that “for four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 11). Darlene Clark Hine (1989, p. 912) argues that rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a “culture of dissemblance” among Black women, and that “virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape,” citing Keckley’s memoir specifically. Keckley’s omissions are not archival accidents; they are culturally legible acts of self-protection. As Darlene Clark Hine (1989, p. 915) argues, “Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle.” The silence around rape is itself a form of agency: Keckley refuses to offer her violation as spectacle, consistent with what Hartman (1997, p. 4) identifies as the refusal to “exploit the shocking spectacle” of Black suffering.

These selective revelations create a textual sanctuary, allowing her to assert control over her identity and resist being defined by trauma. It is essential to distinguish here between Keckley as narrator and Keckley as author: Keckley-as-author has made the deliberate choice to compress these accounts, knowing precisely what effect their compression will have on the reader. The authorial intelligence is not a captive of what the narrator endured; it governs, selects, and arranges. By limiting the audience’s access to her interior life during its most traumatic moments, she reframes her story to prioritize her post-slavery experiences—her triumphs, her access, her authority.

In her pre-Lincoln narrative, Keckley frequently claims “I” to foreground her feelings and experiences, independent of white validation. This contrasts with the later use of RIN, where her identity becomes strategically intertwined with the voices of white elites like Mrs. Lincoln. Keckley makes a conscious decision to minimize the focus on her experiences of oppression and instead present a narrative rooted in empowerment. Her narrative strategy from the earliest chapters exemplifies control over her story, leaving her audience to interpret her life in terms of her triumphs rather than her trauma. Johnnie M. Stover (2002, p. 96), in *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women’s Autobiography*, provides concrete structural evidence of this choice: Keckley devotes only three of her fifteen chapters to her life as an enslaved person while devoting the remaining twelve to her four-year affiliation with the White House. Stover reads this architectural asymmetry as Keckley’s deliberate decision to minimize her years of oppression and maximize her years of freedom and self-reliance, using language and literary genre to assume control over her narrative and skew it toward its most empowered dimensions. This observation matters because it confirms at the level of the memoir’s structure what the analysis of RIN reveals at the level of individual narrative moments: Keckley-as-author governs the whole, determining not just what is said but how much space each period of her life is permitted to occupy. Stover also situates this choice as a deliberate departure from antebellum autobiographers, who relied on readers’ emotional reactions to scenes of oppression and horror to generate political pressure for change. Keckley’s post-emancipation context freed her from that rhetorical obligation—and she uses that freedom architecturally, turning the memoir’s very structure into a declaration of self-possession. As Xiomara Santamarina (2005, p. 140) observes, Keckley’s sense of self is constituted through labor and through the knowledge that labor generates—and it is this knowledge, accumulated across decades of enslaved and free labor, that equips her for the authorial work of the memoir.

4. Intimacy, Dependency, and Power in the White Domestic Interior

In constructing her sense of self, Keckley closely ties her character to that of Mrs. Lincoln, a move that seemingly pushes her to the background while platforming the voices and identities of the white elite. Keckley boldly states in the preface of her memoir: “My own character, as well as the character of Mrs. Lincoln, is at stake, since I have been intimately associated with that lady in the most eventful periods of her life” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 3). This joining of her character with that of Mrs. Lincoln’s from the beginning of the memoir makes her identity seem dependent on how Mrs. Lincoln’s withstands the criticism of the audience. Subsequently, it can be interpreted that how one perceives Mrs. Lincoln, according to Keckley, inadvertently sets up the parameters for how one should view her.

This move immediately works counter to, and possibly erases, Keckley’s identity as a formerly enslaved person while also signaling her desire to be seen equally to Mrs. Lincoln in terms of standing, regard, and high esteem. This does not necessarily mean that she is subscribing to ideas of white supremacy in the political arena—or anywhere, for that matter. It simply shows that her wish is for her character not to be wrongfully attacked. By presenting to the reader that she and Mrs. Lincoln were “intimately associated,” Keckley signals a type of closeness that one may not have suspected between two women from two completely different worlds. What this conveys, without Keckley directly telling us, is that she is highly important, should be viewed as such, and that she has played a part in the major affairs of the White House, which should not be forgotten or overlooked.

To tell the reader these things directly might have seemed self-righteous, but by leaving textual cues through words such as “character,” “Lincoln,” and “intimate,” Keckley signifies what she thinks of herself. She communicates importance through a relational frame (Cullinan and Vitale 2009, pp. 132–45).² It is critical to distinguish here between Keckley as narrator and Keckley as author: it is Keckley-as-author who has made the deliberate choice to open the memoir with this relational framing, knowing full well what the effect on the reader will be. The narrating self may seem to place Mrs. Lincoln at the center; the authorial intelligence is always and unambiguously in control of where the center is. This distinction matters for how we read the memoir’s apparent deference. As Sarah Blackwood (2014, p. 57) notes of the Black domestic observer, “no one could prevent us making good use of our eyes”—and in the domestic interior of the White House, Keckley’s eyes gather everything. She is not merely a witness to history but its governing chronicler.

Reflexive identity narration is employed through verbal cues when Keckley uses Mrs. Lincoln’s words and statements during some of the most volatile moments of Lincoln’s life. For instance, when President Lincoln was assassinated, Keckley recounts that when asked by her staff if there was anyone that Mrs. Lincoln needed at that time, Mrs. Lincoln stated: “Yes, send for Elizabeth Keckley. I want her just as soon as she can be brought here” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 80). Following this, Mrs. Lincoln directly tells her: “Lizabeth, you are my best and kindest friend, and I love you as my best friend. . . I will provide for you” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 90).

Keckley never directly tells the reader that Mrs. Lincoln needs her, loves her, or considers her her best friend in order to build her own prominence and importance. Instead, as readers, we are to trust and regard Keckley as important, loving, and loyal because this is authenticated through Mrs. Lincoln’s own words. Moreover, by closely tying herself with Mrs. Lincoln, she sets up what will matter most to the reader as well as to herself within her own story—Mrs. Lincoln and the behind-the-scenes events. Additionally, to say that both their characters are at stake evokes a different level of tarnishing if not well perceived, given their vastly different social positions. Mrs. Lincoln is white and the wife of a president;

Keckley is Black and formerly enslaved. Keckley continues to support the intertwining of their characters by declaring: “To defend myself I must defend the lady that I have served. The world have [has] judged Mrs. Lincoln by the facts which float on the surface, and through her have partially judged me, and the only way to convince them that wrong was not meditated is to explain the motives that actuated us” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 3).

She foregrounds that her name, her character, and her being are so closely tied to that of Mrs. Lincoln that any attack or less-than-understanding view of Mrs. Lincoln directly affects her—so much so that she ends the statement not as separate individuals but with the word “us.” Using her lesser standing as a free formerly enslaved woman to defend someone of higher social regard in such a bold and widely circulated manner is a curious act. By using the word “us,” she solidifies, for purposes of this memoir, that her identity will not stand alone. Thus, readers can see RIN being invoked through the establishment of this closely knit relationship because Keckley’s character will in part be defined by the lens through which Lincoln is seen.

Upon her introduction to Mrs. Lincoln, readers become more invested in Mrs. Lincoln’s trials, tribulations, identity, and consciousness than in the author of this autobiography. Everything that we learn about Keckley’s feelings is now in reaction to the lives and events of the Lincolns. The centering of their lives by Keckley becomes the main point of interest for both her and thus the reader. However, in doing so, Keckley employs reflexive identity narration: the knowledge we gain about her is given to us through her observations of others. A key point of analysis is the way in which Keckley’s observations shape our understanding of people and, inadvertently, of herself. In these moments we learn that Keckley is very observant, aware of human nature, and sensitive to affect.

Soon after meeting Mrs. Lincoln, Keckley witnesses one of the most painful moments of her life—the loss of her son Willie. Keckley thoroughly documents Mrs. Lincoln’s grief, noting her emotional outbursts, her lack of attendance at Willie’s funeral, and her worn look as she deteriorates and confines herself to her sick bed. Keckley also records the feelings and reactions of the staff and everyone who loved Willie. In revealing these intimate accounts, Keckley makes Mrs. Lincoln a sympathetic character while positioning herself as one to sympathize with, given her presence and support during this time of need. What becomes curious, however, is that after devoting eight pages to everyone’s reactions to the boy’s death, Keckley, almost as an afterthought, mentions that her own son has died, a fact the reader was not made aware of beforehand. Thus, RIN is used here as Keckley relates Lincoln’s loss to that of her own.

When she describes Mrs. Lincoln’s sorrowful disposition, the subdued whispers of the presidential mansion, and the black drapery laid out for mourning, Keckley interjects mid-thought: “Previous to this I had lost my son” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 44). She proceeds to describe this loss in only two sentences, the second highlighting the kindness Mrs. Lincoln showed her in that moment. By assimilating her own grief with Mrs. Lincoln’s, Keckley allows the reader to perceive Mrs. Lincoln’s reaction to Willie’s death as one she too may have felt for her own son. Though Keckley does not tell us the details of her son’s passing or how she personally mourned, the detail in which she illustrates Mrs. Lincoln’s loss serves as an insight. Thus, she informs us how she felt her own pain through the suffering of another. This reveals Keckley’s methodical approach to sharing painful memories and further establishes her authority in choosing what she does—and does not—tell us.

Keckley’s intimate access to the White House and its domestic interior is not merely incidental to her narrative; it is the material condition of possibility for RIN itself. As Hoffert (2001, p. 14) observes, Keckley “pragmatically adopted a frame of reference for judging what constituted economic success, social respectability, and historical significance that was familiar to her white readers,” understanding that white audiences would bring

“considerable anxiety about the social, economic, and political role of blacks in post-emancipation America to their reading and interpretation of what she had written.” Keckley uses this anxiety strategically, giving readers enough of the familiar to keep them reading while consistently organizing interpretation so that her own judgment, authority, and competence emerge as the memoir’s guiding intelligence.

As Mrs. Lincoln became increasingly removed from the White House because of the death of her husband, Keckley allows a showing of her consciousness that is less informed by the acts of Mrs. Lincoln and more by her own experience as a raced individual. In these moments, RIN is evoked less because Keckley is no longer using someone else as a medium to portray critical thought and voice. This is evident when she observes Mrs. Lincoln teaching Tad his lessons after their eviction from the White House and relocation to a summer home at Hyde Park. Keckley sees that Tad is struggling to connect a picture he sees with the spelling of its name. In that moment, Keckley says: “Whenever I think of this incident I am tempted to laugh; and then it occurs to me that had Tad been a negro boy, not the son of a President, and so difficult to instruct, he would have been called thick-skulled, and would have been held up as an example of the inferiority of race” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 94).

She continues demonstrating this awareness of racial difference by adding: “If a colored boy appears dull, so does a white boy sometimes; and if a whole race is judged by a single example of apparent dullness, another race should be judged by a similar example” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 94). What Keckley learns through observation—differentiated from her interpersonal relations with white people—shapes her understanding of how Black people are viewed. Conversely, what Keckley already knows as a Black individual, along with the social dynamics surrounding Blackness at that time, gives her the ground from which she judges these moments. This specialized lens informs her knowledge of white people, how she observes them, and her analysis of the social dynamics surrounding them.

Unfortunately, this moment is also a reminder that although Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln may view their relationship as closely tied, for outsiders this was never the case. This revelation comes to Keckley when she is at the hotel during the New York period and tries to get something to eat. The steward asks Keckley, “Are you not Mrs. Clarke’s servant?” to which she replies, “I am with Mrs. Clark.” Not caring for the distinction between how he sees her and how she sees herself in relation to Mrs. Clark (Mrs. Lincoln in disguise), the steward insists: “It is all the same; servants are not allowed to eat in the large dining-room. Here, this way; you must take your dinner in the servants’ hall” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 120).

This moment is crucial for Keckley because it breaks the bubble that she and Mrs. Lincoln have been occupying. It impacts Keckley deeply and hurts her to the point of tears because she is angry and humiliated. She realizes that without Mrs. Lincoln being First Lady, Keckley herself is not important in the eyes of this segment of society. The relationship is no longer equally beneficial. Reflecting on this period in New York, Keckley shares: “Mrs. Lincoln’s venture proved so disastrous that she was unable to reward me for my services, and I was compelled to take in sewing to pay for my daily bread. My New York expedition has made me richer in experience, but poorer in purse. During the entire winter I have worked early and late, and practised the closest economy. Mrs. Lincoln’s business demanded much of my time, and it was a constant source of trouble to me” (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 139). This acknowledgment registers as a controlled indictment. Rather than saying Mrs. Lincoln used her, Keckley lets the facts say it. The authorial intelligence remains composed even as the narrator counts her losses. Ultimately, the power Mrs. Lincoln once wielded as the wife of Abraham Lincoln is little to non-existent at this point, and if Keckley cannot depend on Mrs. Lincoln to platform her identity as important

and exceptional—because Mrs. Lincoln herself is no longer perceived as such—then the narration must change direction.

5. Refusal, Separation, and Authorial Control

The arc of Keckley's separation from Mrs. Lincoln unfolds across two distinct episodes, and understanding their chronological sequence is essential to reading the memoir's argument about Black self-making. The first is her 1866 visit to the Garland family in Virginia—the white family that had once owned her—which appears in Chapter XIV, “Old Friends.” The second is her September 1867 journey to New York to assist with the disastrous wardrobe sale attempt, which occupies Chapter XV. These episodes are stages in a progression through which Keckley articulates an identity that does not depend on proximity to white power.

The Garland visit comes first, and it functions as a quiet declaration of independence long before the New York crisis makes that independence an urgent necessity. In visiting the people who once owned her—returning as a free, successful, and celebrated woman—Keckley performs what [Darlene Clark Hine](#) (1989, p. 916) describes as the imperative facing Black women “to collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self.” The visit is a controlled staging of her own transformation. She is the one who has chosen to return; she is the one with the power to leave; she is the one whose warmth and magnanimity the reunion demonstrates.

In conversation with Mrs. Garland, Keckley learns that people had told her former mistress she was foolish for thinking that Keckley would ever return, now that she was working so closely with Mrs. Lincoln. Mrs. Garland responds: “I knew your heart and could not believe that you would forget us. I always argued that you would come and see us someday” ([Keckley \[1868\] 2017](#), p. 110). Keckley responds: “You judged me rightly” ([Keckley \[1868\] 2017](#), p. 110). In affirming her own character through the Garland family's estimation of her—rather than through Mrs. Lincoln's—Keckley enacts a version of RIN that does not require the White House as its stage. The social circles shift, but the authorial strategy remains: she allows others' regard for her to establish, for the reader, what kind of woman she is. This visit also introduces the reader to an identity not mediated by Mary Todd Lincoln or her crises—a Keckley who is valued for who she is, rather than for what she can provide to a white woman in need.

[Andrews](#) (1989, p. 12) situates the Garland visit within a broader postbellum literary convention, arguing that in the narratives of Keckley and Douglass alike it is “the former slave who takes the initiative to return to the South and reunite with the former mistress and master” and that “by demonstrating the moral leadership in such reunions, the former slave comes before the reader of the postbellum slave narrative as an active agent in the reconstruction of the South.” [Williams](#) (2022, p. 87) independently confirms this as a recognizable postbellum convention, noting that several writers of this era portray visits to former masters or mistresses as scenes of reconciliation, attesting to the freed people's forgiveness and achievements. For Andrews, the reconciliation scene is a demonstration of moral authority—the visit proves that the formerly enslaved is capable not only of freedom but of magnanimity toward those who once owned them, claiming the high ground in the new national story. [Neary](#) (2014, p. 557), however, argues that Andrews overstates Keckley's optimism, reading the reunion instead as a “calculated reversal” more strategically subversive than it first appears. RIN holds both readings in productive tension: the Garland visit is simultaneously a recognized postbellum convention of moral reclamation and a subtle assertion of narrative sovereignty. At the level of appearance, it enacts reconciliation; at the level of effect—to borrow [Hartman's](#) (1997, p. 8) formulation—it diverges radically, positioning Keckley as the moral superior who chooses to return, who

chooses to extend generosity, and who holds the pen that writes all of it. Andrews's reading and Neary's are not in conflict; they describe the same move from two vantage points, and RIN is the literary mechanism that makes both simultaneously true.

The New York wardrobe episode, which follows, represents the breaking point that makes visible what the Garland visit had quietly begun. Mrs. Lincoln independently identified the New York agents W. H. Brady and Samuel Keyes, approached them directly (initially under the assumed name "Mrs. Clarke"), and entrusted the management of the sale to them—largely against Keckley's better judgment and over her expressed misgivings. As Hogan (2013, p. 420) notes, Brady and Keyes had promised Lincoln considerable returns for her personal effects, but the sale failed spectacularly. Throughout the episode, Keckley's role was that of loyal companion, intermediary, and increasingly concerned advisor. Keckley states clearly: "I consented to render Mrs. Lincoln all the assistance in my power" (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 116). This illuminates the dynamic RIN has been building toward: Keckley is not complicit in Mrs. Lincoln's decisions; she witnesses them, documents them, and ultimately cannot prevent their consequences.

When she comes back to Washington after helping Mrs. Lincoln transition to Chicago, Keckley declares to Mrs. Douglas: "I must do something for myself" (Keckley [1868] 2017, p. 95). This statement marks the first time Keckley signals—directly, in the first person—that she has been entirely devoted to Mrs. Lincoln and has neglected herself. She has fulfilled the role of friend, confidante, shoulder to cry on, and helper. But in announcing that she must now act for herself, she signals the completion of what the Garland visit had begun to suggest: that her identity does not require Mrs. Lincoln as its vehicle. She has reclaimed the "I" and "self" in this moment, a move that signifies a shift in the looking relations between Keckley and Mrs. Lincoln. She is no longer relegated to the margins, where she needs Mrs. Lincoln to substantiate her thoughts and identity, but now centers herself in a position from which she can wholly deconstruct and interrogate Mrs. Lincoln's decisions without being tied to her.

This moment of separation should be read as the culmination of RIN. Hartman (1997, p. 8) argues that performances of compliance, when employed as covert resistance, "manipulate appearances in order to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available." Throughout the memoir, Keckley has been creating exactly this space—a space of action, of authorial sovereignty, that the apparent deference of RIN made possible precisely because it did not announce itself as resistance. The separation from Mrs. Lincoln is the moment when that space becomes visible. RIN was never about dependency; it was the form through which Keckley accumulated the authority she now no longer needs to maintain through the vehicle of white voices.

Keckley's story also highlights the idea of safe spaces—or, more accurately, the lack thereof—for Black women. While her proximity to Mrs. Lincoln provided her reverence and occasional access to white, upper-echelon-dominated spaces, these spaces were far from safe. Instead, they demanded her labor and emotional investment without offering reciprocal support. Through her use of reflexive identity narration, Keckley navigates these constraints, reclaiming agency by documenting her labor and its impact. Her ultimate shift from dependence on Mrs. Lincoln's platform to standing on her own symbolizes a broader struggle for Black women to assert their autonomy and demand recognition for their contributions. It also calls attention to the necessity of creating true safe spaces for Black women—spaces where they are valued for their labor and humanity without exploitation or erasure. Keckley's story, then, serves as a microcosm of the systemic inequities that persist, highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness of Black women in the face of ongoing erasure and exploitation.

6. Conclusions

Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* should be read not as a reactive or confessional narrative shaped by proximity to white power, but as a deliberate literary strategy that sustains authorial control across shifting social and domestic contexts. Through what I term Reflexive Identity Narration (RIN), Keckley consistently positions herself as the governing intelligence of her text, shaping the terms of her representation rather than submitting to the conventions that have traditionally framed Black life writing. RIN names a narrative practice in which the self is articulated reflexively—through selective disclosure, interpretive distance, and strategic emphasis—allowing Keckley to maintain narrative authority while navigating racialized labor, intimacy, and power.

Reading *Behind the Scenes* through RIN reframes how rebellion operates within nineteenth-century Black women's memoirs. Rather than conforming to the dominant slave narrative arc—characterized by exhaustive testimony, linear progression, and the expectation of public trauma disclosure—Keckley resists narrative saturation and instead exercises control over what is legible, sayable, and knowable. Her refusal to center suffering, her management of intimacy within the white domestic interior, and her decisive separation from Mary Todd Lincoln are extensions of a sustained authorial practice that rejects the demand for Black transparency and reclaims interiority as a site of power.

By foregrounding RIN as an analytic framework, this study offers a method for reading Black women's life writing as an active mode of rebellion—one that operates through narrative choice rather than narrative exposure. Keckley's memoir demonstrates that literary resistance does not require overt confrontation or the recovery of a lost voice but can instead reside in the continuous exercise of narrative sovereignty. In this way, *Behind the Scenes* expands our understanding of rebellion and revolution in African American literature, positioning Black women's memoir not as supplementary historical record but as a sophisticated literary form that disrupts dominant genres, revises the logic of the slave narrative, and asserts intellectual autonomy on its own terms.

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Notes

- ¹ This aligns with Patricia Hill Collins's theory of the "outsider within." In her groundbreaking work *Black Feminist Thought*, she describes this state in reference to Black women and labor: "Taken together, Black women's participation in constructing African American culture in all-Black settings and the distinctive perspectives gained from their outsider-within placement in domestic work provide the material backdrop for a unique Black women's standpoint. When armed with cultural beliefs honed in Black civil society, many Black women who found themselves doing domestic work often developed distinct views of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies. Moreover, they [white women] often shared their ideas with other African American women" (11).
- ² Relational Frame Theory "proposes that human cognition and communication are founded in our capacity for identifying and creating relational links between stimuli [words], and made possible by our 'arbitrarily applicable relational responding' ability."

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