

“Nobody Knows Anything about These Men who has not Seen them in Battle”¹: Reclaiming the Slaves’ Bravery through Emancipation Narratives²

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the work of Susie King Taylor, an African American nurse and teacher who wrote her memoirs after the American Civil War. Her text—*Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers* (1905)—constitutes a remarkable example of a “postbellum slave narrative” or “emancipation narrative”³, a transitional genre emerging from the armed conflict which lasted well into the first two decades of the twentieth century. Texts such as Taylor’s have largely been forgotten by scholars, but are central to understanding the tensions experienced by black Americans in the late nineteenth century, and how they faced new challenges, such as their interpretation of and involvement in the armed conflict; whether adjustment and submission were the only solutions left for blacks; what concessions they had to make to become part of American society; and how they were to narrate their experience of liberation, war and its aftermath.

Keywords: postbellum slave narrative, Civil War, soldiers, remembrance.

¹ These words were used by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a colonel in the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, to describe the way in which African American soldiers fought for the Union (Higginson, quoted in McPherson, 1988: 565). Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) was a staunch supporter of abolitionism. He was the colonel of the first black unit to be created during the Civil War, the 1st South Carolina Volunteers.

² Parts of this article belong to my PhD dissertation on postbellum slave narratives.

³ I will use both terms indistinctively in the present dissertation. W. L. Andrews uses the expression “postbellum slave narratives”, while David Blight calls them “emancipation narratives”.

“Nadie puede saber nada de estos hombres si no les ha visto en el campo de batalla”: reclamando la valentía de los esclavos a través de las narraciones de emancipación

RESUMEN

Este artículo debate/presenta una obra de Susie King Taylor; enfermera y maestra afroamericana que escribió sus memorias una vez finalizada la guerra civil americana. Su texto—*Reminiscencias de mi vida en el campamento con la tropa de color nº 33, después conocidos como 1º tropa de voluntarios de Carolina del Sur (1905)*—constituye un ejemplo remarcable de las llamadas “narraciones de esclavos de posguerra” o “narraciones de emancipación”, un género de transición que surgió del conflicto bélico y que duró hasta las dos primeras décadas del siglo XX. Textos como el de Taylor han sido olvidados por el mundo académico pero resultan centrales para entender las tensiones bajo las que vivían los afroamericanos a finales del siglo XIX y cómo se enfrentaron a retos tales como su interpretación de la guerra y de su participación en ésta; si la sumisión era la única solución para los americanos de color; qué concesiones debían de hacer para ser aceptados en la sociedad americana; y cómo debían narrar la experiencia de su liberación, el conflicto bélico y la posguerra.

Palabras clave: narraciones de esclavos de posguerra, guerra civil, soldados, memoria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much attention has been paid to antebellum slave narratives because of their importance in making the voice of African slaves heard for the first time. At a time when humanity was measured according to the individual’s capacity for reasoning, and the ability to manifest this capacity in reading and writing, slave narratives gave voice to the allegedly savage Africans who had been forcefully brought to the American colonies. Thus, the literary production of slaves was a way for people of African descent to “redefine their status within the human community” and present themselves as “speaking subjects” (Gates, 1998: 2). Slave narratives, then, were not born to fulfill literary ambitions, but rather to play a very specific social and political role. The slaves’ personal accounts not only helped their narrators define and (re)create their identities as black individuals, but also played a central part in the collaborative effort to abolish the “peculiar institution”. The success of slave narratives reached its peak in the nineteenth century, especially in the decades preceding the Civil War. Readers were fascinated by the romantic adventures of black fugitives, but they also felt drawn to reading these texts because of the intense political debate they generated.

While in the 1840s and 1850s slave narratives presented white readers with the struggle of escapees fleeing to the North, and denounced the abuses suffered under the yoke of the peculiar institution, the postbellum slave narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century unveiled a new set of purposes. Between 1865 and 1925, more than sixty African Americans—fifty of them born in slavery—published their autobiographical writings. Most of them continued to deal with the peculiar institution, but now from an entirely different angle. Slave narratives were no longer needed as weapons with which to defeat the peculiar

institution, so black narrators found themselves with the need to explore new genres and to put their memories and personal experiences to other uses.

After the war, African Americans faced the harsh reality that the abolition of slavery did not make the physical circumstances of their lives easier. In fact, filled as it was with new uncertainties, life seemed in many ways more difficult for black Americans. The sufferings endured under slavery and the heroic character of the black slave are magnified to epic proportions in these texts so that he/she becomes a kind of American martyr. Most of these narrators portray African Americans as God's chosen people whose heavy personal sacrifices were ultimately made for the sake of the United States. Former slaves and black soldiers are also often presented as the real engine that kept America economically prosperous through their selfless labor, a profound contribution to America's well-being for which blacks now deserved their place as equal partners.

The postbellum debate—also present in emancipation narratives—was no longer about whether blacks should be considered human beings or cattle, but rather was centered around the place black Americans were supposed to occupy in the United States, and what privileges they could enjoy. African Americans, then, were faced with a series of pressing questions: How were they supposed to interpret the war and their involvement in the conflict? Was “the old attitude of adjustment and submission”—as W. E. B. Du Bois defined Booker T. Washington's conciliatory stance—the only solution left for blacks? What concessions did they have to make to become part of American society? How could they, without renouncing their ideals, improve the opportunities available to African Americans in the white Anglo-Saxon world? And most important of all: how were they to narrate their experience of liberation, war and its aftermath?

In this article I will study the case of Susie King Taylor's memoirs as an example of how postbellum narrators had to maintain a difficult balance in their texts. On the one hand, they had to continue the African American narrative of the black experience in the United States, but on the other, they had to bridge the new gap opened by the war between blacks and whites. It is my intention to analyze Taylor's text and show the solutions offered by the author in order to confront the political and textual dilemmas left by the end of slavery.

2. SUSIE KING TAYLOR

Susie King Taylor's autobiographical work *Reminiscences of my Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers: A Black Woman's Civil War Memoir* (1902), has been largely neglected by those interested in former slaves' views on the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. The very few scholars who have discussed her short book define it as “documentary” (Stover 2003: 120) and judge it to be “clever” (Stover 2003: 123), an example of “intellectual ability and literary talent” (Braxton 1989: 43). Taylor's is certainly an interesting work to study, since it provides a first-hand account of life among

African American soldiers from the point of view of a woman who lived among them. The objective of the present analysis, though, is not to focus on the gender implications of the text but rather on its historical value as far as the life of former slaves turned soldiers is concerned. Taylor's text offers an engaging insight into the life of the slaves who ran away from the plantation to fight against the Confederates, as well as a short appreciation of the "peculiar institution".

Susie King Taylor (1848-1912) was born Susie Baker on a plantation in Georgia in 1848. After the capture of Fort Pulaski by Union forces in 1862, all the slaves in the vicinity were liberated, among them Taylor and her family. They moved to Saint Simon's Island in South Carolina, where the menfolk joined the Union army. Taylor immediately became involved with the troops by working as a nurse and laundress, but above all by teaching former slaves how to read and write. After the war, she continued her commitment to the education of black Americans and opened several schools, including a night institution for adults and a public school for children. When the last of these institutions closed in 1868, she worked as a domestic servant. She was also one of the founders, treasurers and presidents of Corps 67, of the Women's Relief Corps.

Taylor's short book *Reminiscences* is a collection of fragmentary autobiographical episodes that take readers through antebellum times, the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. Following the pattern of antebellum slave narratives, it includes an introduction by a white man. In this case, it is a brief piece by Thomas Wentworth Higginson—the colonel who led the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, later called the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, and for which Taylor worked—in which he defines the author as an "exceptional" woman (Higginson, in Taylor 1992: 23). In his introduction, Higginson points out two outstanding aspects of Taylor's book, noting firstly that "actual military life is rarely described by a woman", and secondly that her account is of significant worth, since "no such description has ever been given, I am sure, by one thus connected with a colored regiment" (Higginson, in Taylor 1992: 23). Higginson himself had written an account of his experiences during the war—*Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870)—but "from a wholly different point of view" (Higginson, in Taylor 1992: 23). His approach is utterly different from that of the black nurse, since he provides his readers with a camp diary and concentrates on military aspects from an officer's perspective, while Taylor offers the view of somebody living among privates. Taylor does include extensive references to battles and campaigns, but does not enter into the same level of detail as Higginson.

2.1. Life before the Civil War

Before discussing Taylor's actual description of her life among the troops, it is necessary to devote a section to the author's two initial chapters on her ancestors and childhood. The book could be divided into three clear sections: before, during and after the war, with the third section specifically dealing with her personal life after the war and the situation of black privates in the context of Reconstruction.

When Taylor published her autobiography, the genre of the slave narrative was already distant in time and, as Stover suggests, Taylor uses the frame of the slave narrative at the beginning “more as a historical reference point than as an issue to engage her readers” (Stover 2003: 118). Unlike traditional slave narratives, Taylor begins her life story with a very short chapter exclusively devoted to her female ancestors—beginning with her great-great-grandmother “who lived 120 years” (25) and ending with herself. In the description of this matrilineal ancestry, Taylor pays special attention to the sacrifices of her ancestors, especially her grandmother and mother. They are characterized as self-denying women, who struggled hard to survive. One such example is Taylor’s grandmother, whose heroism is introduced to the reader through an anecdote involving the old lady’s savings. The narrator describes how the Freedmen’s Savings Bank went bankrupt and her grandmother was left broke after losing all her life savings. The old lady is a self-abnegating patriot who, instead of lamenting the loss of her \$10,000, proclaimed “I will leave it all in God’s hand. If the Yankees did take all our money, they freed my race; God will take care of us” (27). The author closes this very short chapter by describing her grandmother’s death.

The second chapter in Taylor’s autobiographical book follows a more traditional pattern of the slave narrative genre. It begins with the expected “I was born” and recounts her trials as an African American who wanted to learn how to read and write. As with most black American autobiographies, Taylor displays a constant concern with the power of the written word. Ever since the eighteenth century, African Americans had had to look for the means to educate themselves in a racially charged historical and social context that did not favor the development of their literacy. As Deborah Brandt explains, black Americans had to “provide education for themselves, as part of their claim to personhood, through networks of Sunday schools, Freedmen schools, as well as clandestine arrangements required in slave conditions” (Brandt 2001: 108). Thus, Taylor illustrates the series of obstacles she had to face in order to become literate. She describes her eagerness for learning as a child with a meaningful passage that shows the ordeals that slaves had to go through if they wanted to learn how to read:

We went every day about nine o'clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time, through the gate, into the yard to the L kitchen, which was the schoolroom. She had twenty-five or thirty children whom she taught, assisted by her daughter, Mary Jane. The neighbors would see us going in sometimes, but they supposed we were there learning trades, as it was the custom to give children a trade of some kind. After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to a square, about a block from the school, and wait for each other (29-30).

The description of the prohibition on educating slaves, a recurring theme in slave narratives, leads to another incident typical of the genre, which is the author’s friendship with a white child and the latter’s instruction of the almost illiterate

slave. Such passages can be found in most canonical slave narratives, for example in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), where Douglass explains how his yearning to read led him to adopt a plan by which he made

[...] friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return (Douglass 2003: 44).

Taylor thus follows the pattern of antebellum slave narratives when she includes a similar scene in which a white girl teaches her:

I had a white playmate about this time, named Katie O'Connor, who lived on the next corner of the street from my house, and who attended a convent. One day she told me, if I would promise not to tell her father, she would give me some lessons. On my promise not to do so, and getting her mother's consent, she gave me lessons about four months, every evening. At the end of this time she was put into the convent permanently, and I have never seen her since (30).

Taylor insists throughout her narrative on the importance of literacy to empower individuals. Her passion for the written word leads her to risk her life not only by going to clandestine reading classes, but also by forging passes for fellow slaves. Taylor's "theft of literacy" (Stover 2003: 120) stems from the narrator's awareness that blacks' illiteracy allows masters to manipulate their slaves: "The whites would tell their colored people not to go to the Yankees, for they would harness them to carts and make them pull the carts around, in place of horses" (31-32). Again, a parallel with Douglass's 1845 narrative can be traced here. In chapter 6 of his autobiography, the young Douglass overhears a conversation between his master and mistress that enlightens him as to the subversive power of literacy: "I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom [...] I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" (Douglass 2003: 41). In the case of Taylor, her skills prove to be so exceptional among slaves that they secure her a good position in the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops.

"Can you write?" he [Captain Whitmore] next asked. "Yes, I can do that also," I replied, and as if he had some doubts of my answers he handed me a book and a pencil and told me to write my name and where I was from [...] He was surprised at my accomplishments (for they were such in those days), for he said he did not know there were any negroes in the South able to read or write. He said, "You seem to be so different from the other colored people who came from the same place you did" (33-34).

As in most antebellum and postbellum African American autobiographies, reading and writing thus appear as the key to not only individuality but also a sense of worth as a human being.

2.2. Taylor's life in camp.

The second part of Susie King Taylor's *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* is basically a series of recollections of her experiences among black soldiers. Although the episodes follow a chronological order, Taylor does not weave a cohesive narrative but rather collects several anecdotes or historically meaningful passages to build a linear narrative that does justice to the effort of black soldiers—or “the boys in blue”, as she likes to call them—in the Civil War. From chapters 3 to 10, Taylor tries to build up the reputation of black soldiers and give them a clear presence in (African) American memory. In the third and last section of her book, the memory of soldiers does not disappear as in popular wartime Northern fiction, where they are killed in action. Instead, she refers to the difficult situation faced by the many surviving veterans, who seem forgotten by the federal government.

Although Taylor's text is a first-hand testimony of her life as laundress, nurse and teacher with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, the identification between the author and the autobiographical voice practically disappears from the text. She narrates all events from a clear, direct—almost impersonal—point of view. The narrative “I” is at times distanced, even analytical, far from the deeply involved narrator present in antebellum slave narratives. Unlike other postbellum African American authors such as Elizabeth Keckley, Taylor's text “speaks words that are not veiled behind sentimentalism” (Stover 2003: 125). It is as if its author were trying to write a historical appreciation of black soldiers rather than a personal memoir. Perhaps the moments when she becomes most emotionally involved in the text are those in which Taylor's voice specifically presents a discussion of black soldiers' sacrifices and veterans' bravery, even more so than when she describes details of her personal life.

Taylor's text is valuable testimony and a historical document of the atrocities that occurred in the American Civil War. In a completely un-romanticized style, Susie King Taylor is faithful to the crude reality of war. At times shocking, she is sympathetic to both blacks and whites. She does not spare her readers any details when conveying the horror of the war and the extent to which human beings can become accustomed to the most terrible scenes:

Outside of the fort were many skulls lying about; I have often moved them one side out of the path [...] Some thought they were the skulls of our boys; others thought they were the enemy's; but as there was no definite way to know, it was never decided which could lay claim to them. They were a gruesome sight, those fleshless heads and grinning jaws, but by this time I had become accustomed to worse things and did not feel as I might have earlier in my camp life. It seems strange how our

aversion to seeing suffering is overcome in war, —how we are able to see the most sickening sights, such as men with their limbs blown off and mangled by the deadly shells, without a shudder; and instead of turning away, how we hurry to assist in alleviating their pain, bind up their wounds, and press the cool water to their parched lips, with feelings only of sympathy and pity (87-88).

This dramatic tension created by the narration of the atrocities and the meaningless loss of life is complemented by a moving description of the Civil War as a conflict between brothers strangely united despite belonging to different armies:

Some mornings I would go along the picket line, and I could see the rebels on the opposite side of the river. Sometimes as they were changing pickets they would call over to our men and ask for something to eat, or for tobacco, and our men would tell them to come over (58-61).

In this context of destruction, pain and a certain camaraderie, Taylor's testimony provides her readers with an accurate description of the hardships that black soldiers had to face by using a language that highlights the intrinsically heroic nature of African American sacrifice and the extent to which blacks claimed their right to equality:

The first colored troops did not receive any pay for eighteen months [...] A great many of these men had large families, and as they had no money to give them, their wives were obliged to support themselves and children by washing for the officers of the gunboats and the soldiers, and making cakes and pies which they sold to the boys in camp. Finally, in 1863, the government decided to give them half pay, but the men would not accept this. They wanted "full pay" or nothing (Taylor 1988: 42).

Black soldiers and their families are presented as self-denying people unfairly treated. Nonetheless, in this 33rd U.S. Colored Troops the color line was apparently slightly blurred—unlike in other companies mentioned in the previous section—since Taylor describes the reaction of Captain Heasley when he heard about African American protests in relation to their pay as “Boys, stand up for your full pay! I am with you, and so are all the officers” (42). Taylor gives several other examples of the heroic dimension of black soldiers such as the degree to which they sacrificed their physical integrity in the battlefield for the sake of their country:

They had to wade through creeks and marshes, as they were discovered by the enemy and shelled very badly. A number of the men were lost, some got fastened in the mud and had to cut off the legs of their pants, to free themselves (90).

Taylor demonstrates the darkest side of the black military experience, not only through African American bodily sacrifice and the veterans' economic problems, but also in the contempt shown by those Southerners who were once their masters. In chapter 9, devoted to the capture of Charleston, Taylor narrates how the soldiers

in the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops participated in the extinction of fires and tried to help Southerners, only to be regarded with disdain:

For three or four days the men fought the fire, saving the property and effects of the people, yet these white men and women could not tolerate our black Union soldiers, for many of them had formerly been their slaves; and although these brave men risked life and limb to assist them in their distress, men and even women would sneer and molest them whenever they met them (107-108).

African American soldiers are thus presented almost as Christ figures, who continue being generous to others even when they are despised. Here Taylor seems to continue the tradition of describing blacks as martyrs or as the chosen people of God, whose sacrifice will be eventually recognized by all. African American generosity and readiness to help others seems to justify Taylor's claim for respect for war veterans— by both citizens and the authorities. The moral worth of these men though, had been previously acknowledged during the war by the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The feelings aroused by that historical moment are presented in all postbellum emancipation narratives, since it was a defining moment in the lives of thousands of African Americans. In Taylor's case, she also describes the exhilarating effect that the Emancipation Proclamation had on herself and the troops; even allowing her language to become slightly more emotional:

It was a glorious day for us all, and we enjoyed every minute of it [...] The soldiers had a good time. They sang or shouted 'Hurrah'! all through the camp, and seemed overflowing with fun and frolic until taps were sounded, when many, no doubt, dreamt of this memorable day (49).

Nonetheless, these celebrations cannot hide the disappointment that Taylor soon felt and which becomes much more evident in the last part of the book. As Stover suggests, the author "cleverly balances her sense of patriotism with her outrage at the inhuman treatment inflicted on America's black citizens" (Stover 2003: 121). Her discontent and pessimism, together, with her fierce loyalty to the former "boys in blue," definitely colors the final section of the book, where Taylor becomes more challenging.

Taylor's eagerness to dignify the image of black soldiers leads her to use documents to verify African American soldiers' bravery in the war. Such is the case of a document, which Taylor includes in its entirety, written by a lieutenant colonel. Thus, very much like the documents and prefaces added to slave narratives in which whites authenticated the existence of a black author, Taylor uses this white-authored letter to confirm her portrayal of African American soldiers as brave and gallant men. She further analyzes the role of soldiers and veterans through the

words of the same white officer, C. T. Trowbridge⁴. In his letters to his fellow soldiers and commanders of the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Trowbridge enthusiastically endorses the role that black soldiers had played in the army:

Nothing can take from us the pride we feel, when we look upon the history of the 'First South Carolina Volunteers,' the first black regiment that ever bore arms in defense of freedom on the continent of America [...] In the face of the floods of prejudice that well-nigh deluged every avenue to manhood and true liberty, you came forth to do battle for your country and kindred. For long and weary months, without pay or even the privilege of being recognized as soldiers, you labored on, only to be disbanded and sent to your homes without even a hope of reward, and when our country, necessitated by the deadly struggle with armed traitors, finally granted you the opportunity again to come forth in defense of the nation's life, the alacrity with which you responded to the call gave abundant evidence of your readiness to strike a manly blow for the liberty of your race [...] Amidst the terrible prejudices that surrounded us, has grown an army of a hundred and forty thousand black soldiers, whose valor and heroism has won for your race a name which will live as long as the undying pages of history shall endure; and by whose efforts, united with those of the white man, armed rebellion has been conquered, the millions of bondsmen have been emancipated, and the fundamental law of the land has been so altered as to remove forever the possibility of human slavery being established within the borders of redeemed America. The flag of our fathers, restored to its rightful significance, now floats over every foot of our territory, from Maine to California, and beholds only free men! The prejudices which formerly existed against you are well-nigh rooted out (115-116).

To any white reader of Taylor's book, these words work as the confirmation of all the arguments given by the black nurse. Trowbridge describes African American privates as men who were determined to risk their lives for what they believed in—freedom, and ultimately the concept of the United States that was envisioned by the Founding Fathers: “The flag of our fathers, restored to its rightful significance”—as well as valiant soldiers whose patriotism and beliefs are powerful enough to overcome “the floods of prejudice”. Interestingly enough, Trowbridge's text highlights precisely what historians such as Cullen, McPherson and even Du Bois emphasized in later decades: the transformative power of the armed conflict, which, through the men's “readiness to strike a manly blow”, apparently turned blacks into real men.

Taylor is as interested in demonstrating the masculine dimension of the black soldier as he is in trying to put African Americans in their rightful place within American society. She follows Trowbridge's patriotic line of argumentation and

⁴ Lieutenant Colonel C. T. Trowbridge initially enlisted in the 1st New York Engineers, Company F (1861) but was later assigned to the 1st South Carolina Volunteers commanded by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Trowbridge was known for his speeches on the equality of races.

embarks on a passionate defense of the value of collective memories of the war and its heroes by engaging in a conversation with her readers—very much in the line of antebellum African American narrators who also appealed to their readers' pity and sense of responsibility:

My dear friends! Do we understand the meaning of war? Do we know or think of that war of '61? No, we do not, only those brave soldiers, and those who had occasion to be in it, can realize what it was. I can and shall never forget that terrible war until my eyes close in death [...] We do not, as the black race, properly appreciate the old veterans, white or black, as we ought to. I know what they went through, especially those black men, for the Confederates had no mercy on them; neither did they show any toward the white Union soldiers. I have seen the terrors of that war. I was the wife of one of those men who did not get a penny for eighteen months for their services, only their rations and clothing [...] I look around now and see the comforts that our younger generation enjoy, and think of the blood that was shed to make these comforts possible for them, and see how little some of them appreciate the old soldiers. My heart burns within me, at this want of appreciation [...] Let the younger generation take an interest also, and remember that it was through the efforts of these veterans that they and we older ones enjoy our liberty to-day (118-120).

This passage, in fact, works as a link between the second and third parts of the book. Contrary to Trowbridge's optimistic predictions, Taylor shows in the last part of her book how the promise of a better future for blacks has vanished with the end of the war.

2.3. After the war

The last part of *Reminiscences* spans from chapters 11 to 14. Taylor devotes these four brief chapters to presenting the situation of African Americans during Reconstruction, as well as during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hers is not a positive view of the topic at all, since these four chapters are loaded with the author's critical comments on the racial situation in the United States. However, no matter how negative the analysis of her country gets, Taylor balances her comments with a profound love for America.

In this third part of *Reminiscences*, the reader encounters a narrator who reveals more about herself than in previous chapters. In fact, the first two chapters of the third section are devoted to her involvement with the Corps 67 Women's Relief Corps and her professional career as a teacher at the end of the war. While in camp, Taylor had been teaching former slaves how to read and write, and after the war, she decided to pursue a career in education. Taylor is presented as a successful woman, an entrepreneur, who succeeds in her determination to become a self-sufficient individual.

The central chapters in this section are entitled "Thoughts on the Present Situation" (Chapter 13) and "A Visit to Louisiana" (Chapter 14) in which the

narrator discusses the racial situation in the United States. Taylor's experiences turn her into a privileged witness who can "observe and later record military, political, and social developments occurring within an emerging, changing America" (Stover 2003: 120). Out of both her first-hand experience in the war and her African American roots, Taylor reaches the conclusion that the United States are not living up to the promises made to blacks:

I wonder if our white fellow men realize the true sense or meaning of brotherhood? For two hundred years we had toiled for them; the war of 1861 came and was ended, and we thought our race was forever freed from bondage, and that the two races could live in unity with each other, but when we read almost every day of what is being done to my race by some whites in the South, I sometimes ask, "Was the war in vain? Has it brought freedom, in the full sense of the word, or has it not made our condition more hopeless?" (135).

In asking whether the war was fought "in vain", Taylor raises the issue of the useless sacrifice of the African Americans who, despite not being treated as equals in the army, risked their lives for a bigger cause: freedom and the Union. Taylor's bitterness stems out of the fact that after the war, the country has betrayed the memory of the promise made by Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation, according to which all black people would be free. Although legally free, African Americans are condemned to a "concealed" slavery; they continue to be marginalized and their rights are systematically violated. The effects of Reconstruction and Jim Crow laws can be seen in Taylor's poignant words:

In this "land of the free" we are burned, tortured, and denied a fair trial, murdered for any imaginary wrong conceived in the brain of the negro-hating white man. There is no redress for us from a government which promised to protect all under its flag. It seems a mystery to me. They say, "One flag, one nation, one country indivisible." Is this true? Can we say this truthfully, when one race is allowed to burn, hang, and inflict the most horrible torture weekly, monthly, on another? No, we cannot sing "My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty"! It is hollow mockery. The Southland laws are all on the side of the white, and they do just as they like to the negro, whether in the right or not (135-136).

Her argument has at its very basis the American credo of freedom and liberty as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution or even in patriotic songs such as "America" (1831), quoted in the fragment. Taylor's contemporary America betrays the ideals of the Founding Fathers by allowing a significant proportion of its population to live in inequality. She seems to transcend her role as a teacher, laundress and autobiographer to adopt that of preacher when she admonishes readers to "remember God says, 'He that sheds blood, his blood shall be required again.' [...] The time is approaching when the South will again have cause to repent for the blood it has shed of innocent black men, for their blood cries out for vengeance" (136). Following the old tradition initiated by the slaves and

continuing in the speeches of late nineteenth and early twentieth century black leaders such as Alexander Crummell and W.E.B. Du Bois, Taylor describes her people as “similar to the children of Israel, who, after many weary years in bondage, were led into that land of promise, there to thrive and be forever free from persecution; and I don't despair, for the Book which is our guide through life declares, ‘Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand’” (151). The promise of a better tomorrow informs her hopes of justice in a country which has failed her people. This disappointment is even more serious when she demonstrates how racial discrimination has reverberated in other armed conflicts in which African Americans have also been involved, such as the Spanish American War of 1898:

At the battle of San Juan Hill, they were in the front, just as brave, loyal, and true as those other black men who fought for freedom and the right; and yet their bravery and faithfulness were reluctantly acknowledged, and praise grudgingly given. All we ask for is “equal justice,” the same that is accorded to all other races who come to this country, of their free will (not forced to, as we were), and are allowed to enjoy every privilege, unrestricted, while we are denied what is rightfully our own in a country which the labor of our forefathers helped to make what it is (137).

Black soldiers once more were called to arms to defend their country, and once more responded as expected. However, as seen in the Civil War, Taylor accuses the country of not reacting appropriately to the bravery and capacity for sacrifice that black privates demonstrated. What is more, Taylor points at the responsibility of the United States as an emerging superpower to behave according to its status, while the facts showed another reality and the world witnessed how America transmitted its racial divide to other countries: “on the entrance of the Americans into Cuba, the same conditions confront us as the war of 1861 left [...] limited freedom, for prejudice [...] has been brought to them and a separation made between the white and black Cubans, a thing that had never existed between them before” (136).

Nonetheless, Taylor's discourse is not that of a political demagogue. She does not limit herself to attacking the Southerners who still “cherish a hatred toward the blacks” (136) but also acknowledges the fact that among white Americans there are those who can see beyond people's skin color:

I do not condemn all the Caucasian race because the negro is badly treated by a few of the race. No! for had it not been for the true whites, assisted by God and the prayers of our forefathers, I should not be here to-day. There are still good friends to the negro (140-141).

She also criticizes those of her own race who hinder the progress and good reputation of African Americans: “I do not uphold my race when they do wrong. They ought to be punished, but the innocent are made to suffer as well as the guilty” (136).

After Taylor's incendiary assessment of the negative aspects of racial relations in the United States, she introduces a certain message of optimism. Chapters 13 and

14 express their narrator's profound faith in the potential of her country. Despite the horrendous racism in the South, and the unequal treatment of her fellow African Americans, Taylor hopes that "the day is not far distant when the two races will reside in peace in the Southland" (136). Her deep love for her origins, i.e. the South, is also contained in her wishes for a better future: "the South will be like the North, and [...] it will be prized higher than we prize the North to-day" (141). The book ends with a deeply patriotic statement: "Justice we ask,—to be citizens of these United States, where so many of our people have shed their blood with their white comrades, that the stars and stripes should never be polluted" (151-152). This emphasizes that the narrator believes in the solid democratic foundations upon which her country is built, and in its potential to sort out problems.

In leaving aside personal anecdotes and concentrating on the fate of black soldiers, Taylor becomes the unacknowledged historian of the African American military experience and of the tremendous effort made by her people to commit themselves to their country in times of adversity. Her testimony—which is proof of both her indignation on behalf of and enthusiasm for, black soldiers—gives voice to hundreds of African Americans whose effort and sacrifice would have otherwise been neglected.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Susie King Taylor's autobiographical text (1902) is one of the first emancipation texts that does not depend on the antebellum slave narratives formula. Taylor devotes only two very short chapters to her past as an enslaved African American. For Taylor, who actively participated in the armed conflict, slavery is more a chronological reference than an issue to discuss in depth. This can be explained by three circumstances: (a) Taylor was freed at an early age, and therefore her memories of slavery were not as intense and central to her life as they had been for previous postbellum authors such as Elizabeth Keckley, Bethany Veney and John Lindsay Smith, (b) she was separated from the antebellum period by greater chronological distance, and (c) she considered her first-hand experience in camp a more defining moment than slavery. Her testimony is exceptional firstly because she was a literate slave who taught reading and writing to African American soldiers, and secondly because she witnessed the horrors of war and suggests an interpretation of them.

Thus, despite sharing some formal and thematic interests with the antebellum slave narrative, Taylor's text necessarily becomes part of the new genre of emancipation narratives as it introduces new features such as descriptions of (a) the cruelty of war, (b) the black soldier and his role in the war, (c) the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and (d) the impact of the conflict on the lives of African Americans. Taylor's text participates in the writing of a postbellum collective history of the African American people both by means of her personal insight into the conflict and by introducing a portrait of black soldiers. In Taylor's

text, African American privates become symbols of the black American struggle for recognition and integration. The struggle of those courageous black men who bravely sacrificed their lives for a country which had rejected them for so long is turned into a metaphor for the constant effort that characterized the lives of African American people throughout history, be it a Frederick Douglass in antebellum times or a Susie King Taylor at the turn of the twentieth century.

Taylor presents a non-sentimentalized account of soldier life. Her observations focus closely on the actual African American war effort, i.e. on the way the soldiers lived, how they fought, and their disappointment after the war. Despite a certain nostalgic rhetoric in Taylor's narrative, her text focuses on giving an accurate historical description of black privates' lives. Through her historical account of African American sacrifice in the battlefield, the author vindicates the commitment of blacks to their country, and the importance of their contribution in the construction of a democratic America. She seeks to situate African Americans within the history of the United States. In this sense, Taylor's emancipation narrative represents more than a personal story; the teacher's memoirs become an example of the attempt to represent for the first time the previously unwritten history of African Americans in the United States. Thus, through the narrative "I", she first claims her own distinct identity as a black individual and then summons the collective voice of the black community in America, which challenges the established white American interpretation of the Civil War, and questions previous interpretations of "blackness" such as those put forth by Lost Cause advocates throughout the nineteenth century.

All in all, by analyzing this text, the present article has sought to demonstrate that above and beyond the intrinsic literary value of such life stories as Taylor's, postbellum slave narratives (a) played a major role in the "historization" of black people, (b) helped African Americans come to terms with their past and present, (c) created new symbols for their collective memory, e.g. the soldier, the Emancipation Proclamation and (d) for the first time attempted to articulate the post-slavery discourse of black American collective memory.

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