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Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood

Xiomara Santamarina

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Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood Xiomara Santamarina According to nineteenth-century racial uplift ideology, African American women served their race best as reformers and activists, or as "doers of the word." In *Belabored Professions*, Xiomara Santamarina examines the autobiographies of four women who diverged from that ideal and defended the legitimacy of their self-supporting wage labor.

Santamarina focuses on *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Eliza Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*. She argues that beyond black reformers' calls for abolitionist work, these former slaves and freeborn black women wrote about their own overlooked or disparaged work as socially and culturally valuable to the nation. They promoted the status of wage labor as a mark of self-reliance and civic virtue when many viewed African American working women as "drudges." As Santamarina demonstrates, these texts offer modern readers new perspectives on the emergence of the vital African American autobiographical tradition, dramatizing the degree to which black working women participated in and shaped American rhetorics of labor, race, and femininity.

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