

**“My Mere Narration”:  
Fanny Kemble’s Intercessions in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation***

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<1>When Fanny Kemble traveled down the Eastern Seaboard in December 1838—from Philadelphia to her husband’s Altamaha River Delta plantations—she had long been hailed a transatlantic sensation. Crowds packed New England theaters to see Kemble as Bianca and Juliet (1832–1834), and her *Journal of a Residence in America* (1835) stirred intrigue and critique among Anglo-American readers. Kemble’s insistence on visiting the sea islands and recording these experiences is a watershed in an already remarkable life. Kemble wasn’t the same person when she returned to Philadelphia in April 1839, and she wasn’t the same transatlantic sensation when she published *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838–1839* in 1863. (The preface is dated 16 January 1863, two weeks after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but the U.K. edition was released in May and the U.S. edition in July.) While many nineteenth-century literary critics read Kemble now because of the private-turned-public series of letters that she published as *Journal* twenty-five years after traveling to the Coastal Empire, the first readers of this book would have known her already as a British actor and author of numerous memoirs, plays, and poems. Kemble’s world changed dramatically in the quarter century between drafting and publishing this book. Still, her writing from this period asseverated abolitionist beliefs that she had held for years—long before the timeliness of the moment when it finally circulated, mid-Civil War. *Journal* forced her to reckon with her own complicities as she lived among slaves, especially women slaves, who made her American life possible. Kemble’s structure—letters addressed to friend and fellow abolitionist Elizabeth Sedgwick—dramatizes this rare perspective: access to details that she is uniquely privileged to observe as the mistress of the plantation, but also uniquely privileged to narrativize as an antislavery author.<sup>(1)</sup>

<2>In her first full letter about Butler Island, Kemble imagines the project, already self-conscious of the care her authorial position requires. Within the first two paragraphs, she critiques Harriet Martineau’s *Society in America* (1837) for its depictions of Charleston rice mills and compares her work-in-progress to Monk Lewis’s *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834). For Kemble, the difference is their manner of observation. She charges Martineau with “misstatements, or rather mistakes [...] in her books, with regard to certain facts” that she presents as “the truth of others” without double-checking herself (54). As a reader sensitive to the genre she is writing/improving, Kemble promises *not* to solicit information. She argues that

Martineau was “misled” by the people “to whom she addressed her inquiries, who did not scruple to disgrace themselves by imposing in the grossest manner upon her credulity and anxiety to obtain information” (54). Kemble then makes one of her most important editorial claims: “It is a knowledge of this very shameful proceeding which has made me most especially anxious to avoid *fact hunting*” (54). Kemble assures her private correspondent and her public, transatlantic readership that she will circumscribe the contents of her letters to “details” that “come under [her] own immediate observation” (55). In this essay, I take Kemble’s polemic on reading/representing abolitionist observation seriously as a frame for studying passages that dramatize the difficulties of narrative witness and mediation.

<3>I close read some of the most famous moments in the *Journal*—Kemble’s intercessions for women slaves—when she realizes authorities and vulnerabilities that she must claim as she attempts “immediate observation” (55). While she sees herself as an advocate for slaves who confide in her about the hardships they face as wives and mothers, she realizes that her mediation endangers them. When she speaks on their behalf, they are beaten. Kemble, overwhelmed by women’s stories, struggles to balance action and discretion, speaking up/out and remaining silent. Her journal, written as a series of unmailed letters, dramatizes the uneven intimacy she develops with women on the plantation. It also shows how she grapples, unexpectedly and sometimes unflatteringly, with the ethical responsibilities attending “immediate observation.” In this spirit, this essay invokes but reframes reception histories that emphasized Kemble’s “mistakes” and instead studies her troubling acts of mediating/writing as meaningful authorial crises.<sup>(2)</sup> It’s against this backdrop of what Kemble herself might term biocritical “*fact hunting*” that Catherine Clinton first discussed Kemble’s sensitivity to intersections of gender, race, and class (“Journal” 79).<sup>(3)</sup> While the *Journal* is, as Clinton argues, a systemic critique of slavery, I’ll put pressure on passages where Kemble’s systemic worldview complicates her treatment of individual women and her already difficult sense of responsibility and complicity.<sup>(4)</sup> Kemble gradually finds herself contending with the power that her position affords her when women “petition” her to speak on their behalf. But how does she reckon with the authority she wrests as the mistress of the plantation and as such a self-conscious observer/writer? Kemble claims that “immediate observation” is her most important “purpose,” but, I argue, she complicates her own authority when she speaks up for two women: Psyche and Teresa. While her intercession for Psyche is “successful,” her intercession for Teresa isn’t. As I demonstrate, Kemble’s narrative modes change for the two women as she negotiates her various roles as author, narrator, and participant.

<4>Kemble frames one of her most passionate intercessions as an act of observation, and she claims to record Psyche’s story to hold Sedgwick’s “interest” (132). “I have had more than a usual amount of small daily occupations to fill my time,” Kemble confides; “and, as a mere enumeration of these would not be very interesting to you, I will tell you a story which has just formed an admirable illustration for my observation of all the miseries of which this accursed system of slavery is the cause, even under the best and most humane administration of its laws and usages” (132). Kemble’s journal-as-letter dramatizes her avowals to be an observer-writer. As Jessica DeSpain writes, Kemble “capitalizes” on “generic expectations” readers would have had for this “epistolary form,” since it “allows for the unveiling of the closeted domestic sphere

through which Kemble can reveal all that is undomesticated about slavery” (114). Sedgwick may be a narrative placeholder, but she is also a confidante whose presence contextualizes Kemble’s authorial choices. Kemble interlaces personal and political familiarities with Sedgwick, diverting our attention from the details of her own life to a polemical reflection on the woman whose trauma she has yet to narrate. Kemble’s grammar underscores this striking narrative posture: she nests her real subject, the “miseries” of slavery, in the middle of a sentence where she worries over her own lapsed writing. Deirdre David argues that by “assuming rhetorical stances derived from her theatrical attitudes, and appropriating for her own ends the imposition of proper roles for the plantation wife,” Kemble “produced a sad account of what was happening to her” (155). David is right. We also witness this savvy in moments of seeming self-effacement, when she appeals to her likeminded friend to read her first-hand observations as even more powerful testaments to their vehement abolitionism. Kemble’s “rhetorical stances” extend far beyond her own story, then, affecting her role as epistolary intermediary.

<5>Compare Kemble’s narrative relationship with Sedgwick to the distanced posture she assumes with Psyche, whose very position in the house inspires equivocating language. “We have,” Kemble writes, “as a sort of under nursemaid and assistant of my dear M[argery], whose white complexion, as I wrote you, occasioned such indignation to my Southern fellow travelers, and such extreme perplexity to the poor slaves on our arrival here, a much more orthodox servant for these parts, a young woman named Psyche, but commonly called Sack, not a very graceful abbreviation of the divine heathen appellation” (132–133). Psyche is almost lost in this sentence “under” compound dependent-clauses-within-dependent-clauses that reinscribe her awkward relationship with the white women she serves. Biographers often gloss this letter when tracing Kemble’s difficult sympathies (see, for instance, Bell 134 and David 159). Many toy with her literariness, characterizing Psyche as “ironically named” (Clinton 124). She may be, and Kemble may be invoking classical allusions to make Psyche—and the abolitionist dramatization of her story—legible to readers unexposed to the traumas she observes firsthand. “Psyche” conjures the woman who married the Greek god of love, an allusion that frames this Georgian woman’s plantation heartbreak as classical tragedy. Yet Kemble mocks slaves’ names elsewhere with language that anticipates this passage: “It is impossible to conceive anything funnier, and at the same time more provokingly stupid, dirty, and inefficient, than the tribe of black-faced heathen divinities and classicalities who make believe to wait upon us here” (40). However tongue-in-cheek the name is, Kemble insists, not once but twice, that she can’t “refuse” “any and every tale of suffering,” but she also won’t “seek” them out (133). Kemble distances herself from Psyche. Yet she assumes a wry “rhetorical perch” (to borrow David’s term) as the mistress of a woman whose nickname abbreviates the Greek word for “soul” (246).

<6>In this way, Kemble also distances herself from the appearance of “*fact hunting*,” matching Psyche’s “silent” “air” with her restrained pledge not “to seek” the story she’s about to tell (133). We can trace this strange tension—Kemble’s insistent self-possession—in the structure of the paragraph that follows, where she frames the occasion for her intercession as chance listening or overhearing and dramatizes her triangulated confidence with Margery and Psyche in an echoic refrain. “I have never questioned Psyche as to her sadness,” she writes, “I tell you, I

asked Psyche no questions” (133, 134). Kemble knows that she must be wary: she must *not* question, must *not* ask. “I am anxious to spare both myself and them the pain of vain appeals to me for redress and help,” she continues, “which, alas! it is too often utterly out of my power to give them” (133). Bookended between two defenses of Psyche’s “silent” dignity is an argument for her own. “It is useless, and, indeed, worse than useless,” she swears, “that they should see my impotent indignation and unavailing pity, and hear expressions of compassion for them, and horror at their condition, which might only prove incentives to a hopeless resistance on their part to a system, under the hideous weight of whose oppression any individual or partial revolt must be annihilated and ground into the dust” (133–134). Psyche is one of many women seeking Kemble’s confidence. She realizes that if they speak up/she speaks up for them, they’d be punished, yet she urges us to sympathize with her. For Kemble, *not* questioning and *not* asking isn’t altruistic: her discretion protects her already precarious authority on a plantation that, she recognizes, is part of “a system” of slavery. As I argue later, this systemic critique becomes more complicated over time.

<7>Kemble punctuates this emotional sequence—the promise *not* to question Psyche, the appeal to Sedgwick, the promise *not* to ask Psyche—with a semicolon and a revelation about the source of Psyche’s “seriousness” and “sadness” (133). Kemble details not just what she learns but also how, heightening our anticipation: Psyche talks to Margery; Margery to Kemble; Kemble to Psyche, King (another slaveholder), Oden (an overseer), and her husband (134). I want to linger over this frame, as much as the story that unfolds over this sequence, in order to draw attention to Kemble’s layered narrative identities. At pivotal moments, Kemble turns from overhearing to reporting “complaints” second-hand, so that she is drawn into confrontations she might otherwise avoid. Kemble becomes listener and storyteller *simultaneously*. In this way, she becomes part of the story she is observing, narrating, and mediating. Her complex rhetorical stances muddy the authority she assumes, not only as a personal/political liaison between Psyche and King/Oden/Butler, but also as a narrative liaison between Psyche and Sedgwick/us.

<8>When Psyche first confides in Kemble, she knows that King once owned her, but not if he still does now that he’s returning to Alabama. Oden explains that he owns Psyche, and she’ll remain in Georgia. Kemble nevertheless promises to “induce” Butler to purchase Psyche and her children, since he owns Joe. Shortly thereafter, she overhears Joe “in a voice broken with sobs and almost inarticulate with passion, reiterating his determination never to leave this plantation, never to go to Alabama, never to leave his old father and mother, his poor wife and children, and dashing his hat, which he was wringing like a cloth in his hands, upon the ground, he declared he would kill himself if he was compelled to follow Mr. K[ing]” (136). We learn, then, through the thin wall separating Kemble’s bedroom from Butler’s dressing room, that she’ll need to protect Joe and Psyche (136). Like Psyche’s conversation with Margery, Joe’s within-earshot confrontation with Butler prompts the ever-listening Kemble to action.

<9>While Kemble knows what happens to Joe by the time she writes, her prose slips between past and present tense. Her “narrative present” reminds us that she is part of the story she otherwise claims to observe. She rehearses her intercessions with all the blind spots of a person

involved in the story, not as someone observing/writing with the clarity of hindsight. After appealing to Oden, she realizes that her husband's timeline is suspicious. Even in this letter, she barely lets herself wonder whether Butler sold Joe to King, just to be cruel, after King sold Psyche to Oden. "I do not know which was the real transaction," she admits, "for I have not had the heart to ask; but you will easily imagine which of the two cases I prefer believing" (137). When Kemble appeals to Butler, and to Oden about Butler, she's struck by what the men leave unsaid. Butler "gave [her] no answer whatever" about his intentions (137). Oden reveals that Joe will stay, but not whether Butler or King broke the deal. Kemble is left to piece their circuitous transactions together on her own. Without explicitly saying it, she shows how they terrorize her—and Joe and Psyche—for advocating. "In maneuvers between men (and behind her back)," Alison Booth saliently argues, "the family of Psyche and Joe is preserved intact as Kemble wished, but the episode seems to reinscribe her helpless collaboration with the masters, her sense of 'unimagined guilt' for the oppression of which she is a pawn" (240). Once Kemble wonders about what Butler knew when, she also wonders about herself. Her intercessions spur horrifying realizations: that she is a mistress of a plantation, even if she denies the title, and this position necessarily implicates her in awful transactions.

<10>She expresses this most powerfully and ironically through her sympathetic outburst for Joe: "how I cried, and how I adjured," she writes, "and how all my sense of justice, and of mercy, and of pity for the poor wretch, and of wretchedness at finding myself implicated in such a state of things, broke in torrents of words from my lips and tears from my eyes!" (137). Notice how she slips herself into the last of those parallel clauses. Within the "how," "how," "how" repetition, there are also four prepositional phrases. The first three are classic abolitionist rallying cries ("justice," "mercy," "pity"). The last, her own delayed sense of "wretchedness," breaks words from her lips and tears from her eyes. Still, she's passively "implicated." It's only when she knows Joe will remain in Georgia that, she writes, "for the first time, almost a sense of horrible personal responsibility and implication took hold of my mind, and I felt the weight of an unimagined guilt upon my conscience; and yet, God knows, this feeling of self-condemnation is very gratuitous on my part, since when I married Mr. [Butler] I knew nothing of these dreadful possessions of his" (138). That word "gratuitous" is worth pause. Does Kemble absolve herself of owning Joe or coaxing Butler not to sell him? This is the passage many cite—baffled—when musing over Kemble's decision to marry Butler. Kemble's claim that she "knew nothing" about Butler's inheritance before marrying him may be unbelievable. I'm less interested in whether her claim is true, though, than in the curious fact that she reveals it at this moment. Advocating for Joe prompts an inward turn: a realization, a reflection, a disclosure of the most important thing she *didn't* know about her own husband. Still more interesting is the rest of the sentence, where she imagines a world in which she *did* know: "and even if I had I should have been much puzzled to have formed any idea of the state of things in which I now find myself plunged, together with those whose well-doing is as vital to me almost as my own" (138). Kemble realizes that her "well-doing" is, like Joe's and Psyche's, at Butler's mercy.

<11>This is an important precursor to the end of the letter, where she dilates on Psyche's fate and recognizes that her earlier protestations about *not* being the mistress are ideological

fantasies. Her identities as mistress and advocate collide when she finally comes to terms with her own economic dependence on slavery. Kemble realizes that the only way to protect Psyche is to purchase her: “revolving in my mind the means of rescuing Psyche from her miserable suspense,” Kemble writes, “a long chain of all my possessions, in the shape of bracelets, necklaces, brooches, earrings, etc., wound in glittering procession through my brain, with many hypothetical calculations of the value of each separate ornament, and the very doubtful probability of the amount of the whole being equal to the price of this poor creature and her children” (139). What’s striking is the way she imagines her baubles inching forward in her brain, one-by-one, immediately after her agonized meditation on Psyche’s “miserable suspense.” Even if this “chain” of “possessions” isn’t enough to purchase Psyche’s family, she imagines them as calculable property. In order to intercede, she thinks of herself as the mistress, but, and here’s the rub, as a mistress who purchases slaves apart from the master.

<12>Kemble’s “hypothetical calculations” inspire one of her most important turning points, since she must reckon with her own powerlessness “for the first time in [her] life,” not as a married woman, or even as a woman married to a slaveholder, but as a woman who earned money on her own. Kemble punctuates that chain-of-possessions sentence with this horrifying realization. “For the last four years of my life that preceded my marriage I literally coined money,” she writes, “and never until this moment, I think, did I reflect on the great means of good, to myself and others, that I so gladly agreed to give up forever for a maintenance by the unpaid labor of slaves—people toiling not only unpaid, but under the bitter conditions the bare contemplation of which was then wringing my heart” (139). As Clinton and David argue, Kemble identifies with the women *as a woman* (and as a wife): she realizes that marriage to Butler voids any financial independence she may have had to advocate.

<13>When Kemble asks Oden if she can purchase Psyche, he reveals he sold her that morning. It’s only after another protracted narrative pause that she reveals to us that her husband is the owner. In lingering over the momentary panic she felt as Psyche’s intermediary, Kemble begins positioning herself as the heroine of her story. Within one paragraph, she pivots from humiliating interiority to unbridled pride that is self-deprecating only insofar as it dramatizes the scene she has made as an Englishwoman on an American plantation. “Think, E[izabeth],” she writes, with sincerity and tongue-in-cheek audacity in equal measure, “how it fares with slaves on plantations where there is no crazy Englishwoman to weep, and entreat, and implore, and upbraid for them, and no master willing to listen to such appeals” (140). It’s tempting to be swept up in the “happy” ending. On one level, Butler’s purchase ensures that Psyche and Joe will live together with the same owner. On another, it reflects Kemble’s rhetorical prowess. She couldn’t purchase Psyche herself because she persuaded her husband to do it himself. She becomes his moral compass. By layering her role as author/narrator over her role as intercessor, she underscores the power she wrests as first-person heroine. While she claims authority in her gender and her national identity, the “rhetorical perch” she claims enables her to write herself in and out of scenes and, at the same time, shape her readers’ impressions of them. Long before we meet Psyche, in that first letter where Kemble declares her narrative “purpose,” she insists that her descriptions of slaves’ “mode of existence” will be “the staple commodity of [her] letters” (53). At this moment when she is most self-conscious about her

own narrative ethics, that word “commodity” sticks out—all the more striking as we witness Kemble grappling with her real sense of ownership as Psyche’s listener, storyteller, and mistress.

<14>Psyche’s narrative is largely contained within that single letter, with its mirrored intercessions and cloying appeals to Sedgwick, and to us, to recognize its author.<sup>(5)</sup> Kemble mentions Psyche twice in the second part of her *Journal*, which she writes from the cotton plantation across the river. She identifies Psyche to Sedgwick, in appositives and parentheticals, as “the heroine of the rice island story” and “[...] the poor thing whose story I wrote you from the rice plantation)” (255, 301). In these passing references to Psyche, Kemble reinscribes the point she makes to Sedgwick: that Psyche’s “story” (Kemble uses this word both times) has been resolved (255, 301). Psyche’s “story” is more discrete (narratively) than others Kemble recounts in subsequent letters, which often move from one topic to another over the course of a day or a week. When Kemble mentions Psyche this third time, it’s because she needs help: she can’t see her mother and brothers, who are slaves on another plantation in Darien, without special permission. While Kemble promises to help Psyche, we never learn whether she is successful. This is the last time Psyche’s name appears in the *Journal*—just two weeks before Kemble leaves for Philadelphia. Psyche’s story seems so resolved when we read it as Kemble frames it, or when we read it alongside other intercessions. Yet, as the *Journal* attests, Psyche’s hardships aren’t over with the seeming conclusiveness of the first letter or the compressed inconclusiveness of the third, even if her story, within Kemble’s narrative logic, is.

<15>Biographers tend to discuss Psyche’s narrative alongside Mary’s or Teresa’s, and for good reasons: read together, they show Kemble reckoning systemic critiques of slavery with the realities of women’s individual stories—and her unexpected place in them.<sup>(6)</sup> Ultimately, Kemble has to square her rhetorical project, an epistolary argument against slavery addressed from one white abolitionist woman to another, with these women’s horrifying appeals. While Psyche is “the heroine of the rice island story,” many other women, including Die, Harriet, Mary, and Teresa, endure violent hardships for confiding in Kemble. Unlike Psyche’s story, Harriet’s and Teresa’s are discontinuous: their appeals, and the consequences of their appeals, are cushioned between entries about Kemble’s day-to-day life. We encounter these women in her reflections; in her conversations at the house and the infirmary; and, perhaps most unsettling, in her lush descriptions of the marshy landscape that has her yearning for refuge across the Atlantic Ocean, under the British Empire. Indeed, there are meaningful differences between Kemble’s narrative treatment of her intercessions for Psyche and Teresa, and these deserve close reading.

<16>Teresa’s appearance in four key moments punctuates Kemble’s increasingly complicated sense of authority and its limitations. Compare Kemble’s earliest representations of Psyche with those of Teresa, whose narrative unfolds episodically and traumatically across four letters. Kemble meets Teresa twice before she names her. Anonymous Teresa is the first slave she describes, a fact that we might not notice (despite subsequent narrative threads linking this exact passage to her second and third appearances), given Kemble’s impersonal language. Kemble singles Teresa out from the crowds of slaves assembled to greet the Butlers in

rowboats and on riverbanks near the plantation. “One tall, gaunt Negress flew to us,” Kemble recalls, “parting the throng on either side, and embraced us in her arms. I believe I was almost frightened; and it was not until we were safely housed, and the door shut upon our riotous escort, that we indulged in a fit of laughing, quite as full, on my part, of nervousness as of amusement” (50). Kemble represents Teresa as a spectacle whose naïve “delight” stands out from “the most extravagant and ludicrous gesticulations” the other slaves make, she assumes, to “express their ecstasy at our arrival” (49). Teresa also stands in stark relief to the equanimity Kemble affects until she is behind closed doors. She dramatizes this tension in the stilted, halting, odd constructions of that second line. Her wordiness—the uncertainty qualifier/verb “believe,” the adverb “almost”—equivocates. Perhaps she isn’t so afraid. Her laughter seems callous, *because* she parses its underlying emotions with brutal precision. Yet Kemble acknowledges that she is laughing at Teresa’s outburst as much as she is laughing to mask her own. That embrace—and Kemble’s recollection of it across the *Journal* as Teresa’s identifying feature—becomes an unexpected precursor to intercessions that eventually bring the two women together.

<17>We should pause, then, over that strange temporal lapse between the first and second sentences I’ve quoted above. The unnarrated period between stepping onto the dock and into the house is conspicuous, eliding the surprise she no doubt feels upon this strange reception. It also emphasizes Kemble’s slick turn from Teresa’s overwrought scene to her own, and this domino-like effect connects/disconnects them to/from one another. Within that second sentence, Kemble whisks us from the hypervisibility of a position that she cannot bear to the privacy of her bedroom, where she will express herself more openly, with Margery, later with Sedgwick, and even later with us. Notice that she leaves Teresa, “[their] riotous escort,” just outside her bedroom door (50). Kemble’s shift from outward to inward reflection is even more interesting given the clues she seems to drop for us to read between her own lines—to second guess her own interpretations. Just as her in-the-moment fear rings half-hearted, maybe even disingenuous, so too does her belief that the slaves “delight” in her arrival. Does she really believe that she’s being welcomed and embraced by slaves overcome with “ecstasy”? Does she—an actor—entertain the possibility that they are performing expected roles as slaves before their master and mistress?

<18>Kemble addresses this elephant in the last, very self-conscious, paragraph of this letter. After the “laughing” passage, she leaves the house, and then she leaves the spot where she has been walking, having realized that the slaves are watching her. While she thought she “had escaped observation” outdoors, she found herself once again “enveloped in a cloud of these dingy dependents, who gathered around [her], clamouring welcome, staring at [her], stroking [her] velvet pelisse, and exhibiting at once the wildest delight and the most savage curiosity” (50). Like so many nineteenth-century travel writers, Kemble realizes that the very people she is studying are also studying her. By the end of the letter, she seems disturbed but thrilled by this attention, and she admits that “the door of the room where [she] sat [...] was purposely left open” (50). Even if we are to read this letter as one of the first moments when Kemble reckons with slavery, not through contested ideologies, but through overwhelmingly real human bodies, she is still far from coming to terms with her necessary role in the system. In fact, she seems

even more baffled by it. “This zeal in behalf of an utter stranger,” Kemble muses, “merely because she stood to them in the relation of a mistress, caused me not a little speculation” (50). Kemble’s controlled language—the third-person pronoun “she,” referring to herself, the prepositional phrase “the relation of a mistress,” and the negative qualifier “not a little”—is the first of many times she distances herself from the title slaves must recognize in public, though she will not. Even in this clipped first encounter with Teresa, Kemble leverages her narrative savvy to neutralize her own awful role. What we glean from this passage has less to do with Teresa (who disappears in that strange pause I’ve lingered over) than with Kemble’s own self-consciousness: she realizes, before offering any substantive accounts of the slaves on these sea islands, that she, too, is subject to uncomfortable observation. In fact, this paragraph immediately precedes Kemble’s dilation on her narrative “purpose.”

<19>It’s no accident that when we encounter Teresa again, in this very same letter where Kemble promises to “avoid *fact hunting*,” she renders herself distant, a party to the conversation we witness, but not its initiator (54). Kemble is, as always, deliberate with her narrative frame. “I was summoned into the wooden porch or piazza of the house,” she writes, “to see a poor woman who desired to speak to me” (66–67). Teresa seeks Kemble, her passive voice insists, not the other way around.<sup>[Z]</sup> In fact, Kemble doesn’t even realize who is summoning her until she’s outside. Only then does Kemble recognize Teresa for her “emaciated-looking” body: she is the “Negress who, on the day of our arrival, had embraced me and my nurse with such irresistible zeal” (67). That context is essential. While Teresa once struck Kemble as frightening, unrestrained, and zealous, she appeals to her mistress now precisely because she is weak: “She was the mother of a very large family, and complained to me that, what with childbearing and hard field labor, her back was almost broken in two” (67). At this moment, Kemble shifts from mistress to listener, storyteller, and abolitionist witness. She’s Teresa’s mouthpiece. Even as Kemble narrates Teresa’s “most distressing history of bodily afflictions,” she seems aware that her words cannot communicate the physical traumas that this woman has had to endure (67).

<20>Kemble remembers the moment when Teresa pulls her dress over her torso and reveals a body—“a spectacle”—that this otherwise exacting letter doesn’t describe in detail. “With an almost savage vehemence of gesticulation,” writes Kemble, Teresa “suddenly tore up her scanty clothing, and exhibited a spectacle with which I was inconceivably shocked and sickened. The facts, without any of her corroborating statements, bore tolerable witness to the hardships of her existence” (67). Kemble urges us to confront Teresa’s “history of bodily afflictions” with visceral immediacy, but resists indulging graphic or euphemistic representation. Kemble offers almost no description of Teresa’s body. While we might be tempted to read this passage as sensational—what shocks and sickens Kemble is left to our imagination—I don’t think she invites us to see “the spectacle” in our mind’s eye at all. Her language precludes sensationalism. The pain that we witness is mediated, even confusingly vicarious: we’re privy not to Teresa’s body, but to Kemble’s reaction to it. Kemble’s prose—the turn from another person’s pain to her own visceral response as narrative proxy—is abolitionism in the classic mid-nineteenth-century tradition: sympathy. She urges us to feel. Her editorial sensibilities—she witnesses Teresa’s body, but she does not describe it to us—spare Teresa further dehumanizing exposure.

While it seems crass to surmise what remains unnarrated, Kemble's own self-consciousness about what does not need "corroborating" should give readers pause. Besides Christopher Mulvey, the only person to gloss the moment when Teresa shows Kemble her unclothed torso, critics have not discussed the fact that this enslaved woman appeals to her mistress for help, using her body as testimony (83). Whether Teresa's hardships are visible in her back—"almost broken in two"—or in other traumas excised from this text entirely, Kemble's narrative treatment compels us to worry over details she secrets at the very moment when she also promises to petition her husband on Teresa's behalf. (8)

<21>This passage is also a metanarrative reaffirmation/reassertion of Kemble's authorial purpose. The presence of Teresa's body, Kemble reasons, there and in these sentences, is tantamount to "facts" that stand independent of the woman's own "corroborating statements" (67). The word "facts" is loaded in this book and especially in this letter. Kemble's usage here is odd: whatever shocks and sickens her about Teresa's body, and whatever remains unnarrated, appears to us as "facts" that transcend the need for further exposition. Kemble transfigures Teresa's body into evidence of her own narrative authority and sensitivity. It must have surprised Kemble that Teresa would expose her body—anywhere, but especially on the porch of the house—to her mistress. While Anglo-American slave narratives often document black women's stripped, flogged bodies at the very moments when they are subject to horrific violence, Kemble's letter depicts a woman lifting her threadbare dress to make the lifelong traumas she has had to endure immediately legible to her mistress who just arrived. Such a record is surprising in 1830s or 1860s Victoriana, and especially surprising in a text by a woman who represents her English femininity so self-consciously as antislavery ethos.

<22>We ought to be keenly sensitive to the narrative contexts that Kemble repeatedly claims across this letter, then, for whatever she elides about that awful moment, she primes this scene in the sentences and the paragraphs just before. She moves from the privacy of her bedroom to the porch of the house, where she is witness to the public "facts" of Teresa's body. These narrative circumstances are crucial. While Kemble's epistolary frame may be strategic at other points (Sedgwick seems more like a ruse than a real addressee), it affords Teresa a certain narrative discretion. Kemble may be recording her "history of bodily afflictions," but it's in confidence to a like-minded woman. Even when Kemble publishes the *Journal* almost twenty-five years later, Sedgwick's figurative presence mediates the problem of subjecting Teresa's body to further exposure. An encounter that otherwise merely objectifies Teresa seems, instead, to humanize her and feminize her in the eyes of her soon-to-be advocate.

<23>Before turning her attention to the Butler Island infirmary, which she visits for the first time immediately following this encounter, Kemble assures Teresa that she will act on what she learned. Her promise is bittersweet. She realizes—because Teresa's body is so broken—that whatever care she might offer won't "cure" the long-term consequences of the violence to which she was, is, and will remain subject. Kemble's prose wanders from Teresa to an explicitly gendered critique of slavery, one that targets the brutalities of reproductive labor: "I promised to attend to her ailments and give her proper remedies; but these are natural results, inevitable and irremediable ones, of improper treatment of the female frame; and, though there may be

alleviation, there cannot be any cure when once the beautiful and wonderful structure has been thus made the victim of ignorance, folly, and wickedness” (67). Kemble’s compound sentence reveals evermore complex allegiances as sympathetic mistress and listener/storyteller: she turns from her most immediate responsibilities in the first clause to her discussions of the long-term damage done to these women’s bodies in the second and third. Her language at the end urges us to compare “the beautiful and wonderful structure” of “the female frame” to the system that enslaves women—and subjects them to “inevitable” and “irremediable” violence. Kemble begins to confront the absence of women’s bodies from the more ideological, even polemical, abolitionism to which she subscribed before arriving on her husband’s rice plantation.

<24>Despite Kemble’s impassioned response to Teresa, her second and third appearances in the *Journal* are separated by almost one hundred pages. At some point, she speaks with Butler or Oden but doesn’t narrate her intercession. In fact, she doesn’t tell Teresa (or Sedgwick or us) that she spoke up at all. We realize that Kemble has had a conversation with someone only after Teresa is punished for “complain[ing]”: “Returning from the hospital, I was accosted by poor old Teresa, the wretched Negress who had complained to me so grievously of her back being broken by hard work and childbearing” (154). This encounter—precipitated by Kemble’s unnarrated mediation—appears just two letters after Psyche’s story. Unlike Psyche, whose name has inspired critical surmising, Teresa is an anonymous “Negress” until this point, identifiable to us by her remarkable body (50, 67): the second time we see her, she is the “emaciated-looking” woman who zealously “embraced” Kemble in those first moments, the third time we see her, she is the woman with a back “almost broken in two” (50, 67). Ultimately, we learn Teresa’s name, if we connect the dots across these letters, at the very moment when she reveals that Kemble inadvertently exposed her to further violence. “She was in a dreadful state of excitement,” Kemble recalls, “which she partly presently communicated to me, because she said Mr. O—had ordered her to be flogged for having complained to me as she did” (154). Kemble may have advocated for Teresa, but she frames the violent consequences of remonstrating as second-hand news to us, and this narrative distancing intensifies strategies that are essential to Psyche’s story: Kemble’s efforts to frame her intercessions as acts of unsolicited listening/overhearing.

<25>Still, I want to emphasize Teresa’s anonymity and the related discontinuity of her story across Kemble’s *Journal*, since these dissociating qualities set her apart from Psyche, Sinda, and other women whose narratives are circumscribed to single letters. Teresa didn’t have the same recourse to Kemble as Psyche (a nursemaid) or Rose (the midwife), because she worked in the fields. The real-time interruptions in Teresa’s narrative—the gaps, for instance, between her second and third appearances—no doubt reflect the barriers separating the two women. We can read these barriers in cautious phrases that dramatize Kemble’s intermediary role. Teresa isn’t totally forthcoming (maybe she’s “excited,” maybe she’s scared), but, Kemble must realize, neither is Oden. Kemble learns of Oden’s punishing Teresa *through* Teresa. He doesn’t tell Kemble that Teresa will be punished for complaining—or for her mistress’s complaining on her behalf. Kemble is so horrified by this encounter with Teresa that she appeals directly to Butler. Yet she’s also horrified for what it reveals about her powerlessness with her husband.

<26>This Kemble is not the “crazy Englishwoman” we read in Psyche’s story. That letter closes not only with her self-aggrandizing navel-gazing but also with her praise for her husband. Despite the fact that Butler probably tried to separate Joe from Psyche in order to nullify Kemble’s intercessions, she still closes with an unlikely fantasy: if she is the heroine, then he is the hero. Just a letter and a half later, Kemble’s narrative bravado isn’t merely naïve. It’s dangerous. While she could spin her intercessions for Psyche as heroic (with sincerity and tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation in equal measure), Kemble’s appeals for Teresa failed, subjecting her to brutal punishment. Still, Kemble turns the narrative back on herself with Teresa, just as she did with Psyche, and lingers over her own pain: “It seems to me that I have come down here to be tortured, for this punishing these wretched creatures for crying out to me for help is really converting me into a source of increased misery to them. It is almost more than I can endure to hear these horrid stories of lashings inflicted because I have been invoked [...]” (154). We might read Kemble’s cries for sympathy as enacting the emotional intercessions that she has had with Teresa or Psyche: she is calling for us to feel, just as these women called on her.

<27>Yet Kemble is writing here less as a narrator than as a person implicated in a crisis that she did not anticipate. While her pity-me appeals are insensitive, she does realize that speaking up can be more harm than help. Kemble assures us that she censors what she says to slaves, no matter how outspoken she may be when she appeals to her husband on their behalf: “[...] and though I dare say Mr. [Butler], thanks to my passionate appeals to him, gives me little credit for prudence or self-command, I have some, and I exercise it, too, when I listen to such tales as these with my teeth set fast and my lips closed” (154). “Whatever I may do to the master,” she writes, “I hold my tongue to the slaves, and I wonder how I do it” (154). Kemble fears the consequences of her silence, but she also realizes the power of her words, a power she vastly underestimates, even if she appreciates the discretion she must exercise in speaking for these women.[\(9\)](#)

<28>While we do not encounter Teresa again, she is the central subject of one of Kemble’s most important conversations with Butler. Like Kemble’s intercessions for Psyche and Teresa, her narrative of this confrontation is illuminating not just for what she describes but also how. If Teresa helps Kemble recognize the dangers of these intercessions and her compromised authority, then her subsequent appeals to Butler suggest the ways that this difficult realization affects her narrative modes. In previous letters, Kemble often reports the outcomes of conversations she has had with her husband; however, she rarely narrates them. After Teresa, she does. Several days pass before Kemble confronts Butler, but when she does, her sympathies are torn. While this may be the first and most detailed confrontation she narrates, it’s not their first: “These discussions are terrible: they throw me into perfect agonies of distress for the slaves, whose position is utterly hopeless; for myself, whose intervention in their behalf sometimes seems to me worse than useless; for Mr. [Butler], whose share in this horrible system fills me by turns with indignation and pity” (159). Notice Kemble’s parallelism. The “for,” “for,” “for” repetition catalogs her conflicting “agonies”—the layered perspectives she assumes. Their proximity to one another dramatizes how impossible it is for Kemble to

reconcile her identities as abolitionist mistress/witness, abolitionist intermediary, and slaveholding wife.

<29>The point that she makes in this sequence prepares us for her next line, where she shifts to something like free indirect discourse, mouthing Butler's reasoning in a string of defensive rhetorical questions: "But, after all, what can he do? how can he help it all? Moreover, born and bred in America, how should he care or wish to help it? and, of course, he does not; and I am in despair that he does not: *et voilà*, it is a happy and hopeful plight for us both" (159). Kemble's turn from a reflection (the for, for, for clauses) to a novelistic convention (the free-indirect-discourse questions) dramatizes the crisis she is starting to comprehend. Instead of rehearsing their arguments as he-said-she-said dialogue, Kemble imagines exasperated platitudes that Butler would offer in response to her own unnarrated appeals; and she does this, evocatively, by becoming his narrative intermediary. As Booth notes in a parenthetical that links/anonymizes these plantation men, "(Mr. \_\_\_\_\_' is never a narrator in Kemble's text)" (238). Unlike many people (Teresa, Psyche, Joe, and even Oden), Butler has little direct dialogue. On quick glance, it's difficult to tell them apart, here, since the questions Kemble imagines are extensions of worries she had when she learned that Oden beat Teresa.

<30>Kemble does not answer these rhetorical questions in his voice or in her own. Instead, she narrates Butler's reaction to her renewed, unreported appeals for Teresa. Here, Kemble actually emphasizes the fact that Butler is "speaking" in this passage, a strategy that allows her to deflect responsibility, not in her own voice, but from a third-person perspective:

He maintained that there had been neither hardship nor injustice in the case of Teresa's flogging; and that, moreover, she had not been flogged at all for complaining to me, but simply because her allotted task was not done at the appointed time. Of course this was the result of her having come to appeal to me instead of going to her labor; and as she knew perfectly well the penalty she was incurring, he maintained that there was neither hardship nor injustice in the case; the whole thing was a regularly established law, with which all the slaves were perfectly well acquainted; and this case was no exception whatever. (Kemble 159–160)

At the very moment when Butler addresses Kemble's role as intermediary, he dismisses her culpability and her sense of responsibility. In doing so, he also dismisses the possibility that she might effect change at all. Still, it's impossible not to notice that Kemble is paraphrasing Butler, because she punctuates their exchange with dialogue markers ("he maintained") that dramatize his circuitous, defensive insistence and maybe even her own. It seems like she is trying to convince herself, against her better knowledge, that she isn't responsible. According to this logic, we must believe that Teresa was beaten for complaining directly to Butler, not for complaining indirectly to Kemble. Her repeated dialogue markers are conspicuously long: it's not "he maintained" but "he maintained that there was neither hardship nor injustice in the case" both times. Kemble's wordiness in what is a narrative point of fact (a dialogue marker clarifies who said what) actually emphasizes how she perceives his tone and capitalizes on it to recast herself as heroine. [\(10\)](#) Kemble demonizes her husband for his complicity with Oden. Yet

by repeating that line of his about there being “neither hardship nor injustice,” she also absolves herself, if only in his eyes, of guilt she clearly feels. At one of her angriest moments with him, and his with her, Kemble manipulates Butler’s flawed reasoning to heroicize herself.

<31>By the end of their conversation, Kemble acknowledges her own failures as Teresa’s advocate. Teresa’s “case” forces Kemble and Butler to confront slavery writ large—what she terms “the abstract question”—and the inevitable threats that particular intercessions for particular slaves pose to it (160). Butler defends Oden. Kemble, still writing in Butler’s voice, explains why Oden had to punish Teresa so severely: “The circumstance of my being on the island could not, of course, be allowed to overthrow the whole system of discipline established to secure the labor and obedience of the slaves; and if they chose to try experiments as to that fact, they and I must take the consequences” (160). Kemble counters Butler’s defense of “the whole system” with her own structural critique of slavery. The narrative turns from report to reflection:

When I was thus silenced on the particular case under discussion, I resorted, in my distress and indignation, to the abstract question, as I never can refrain from doing; and to Mr. [Butler]’s assertion of the justice of poor Teresa’s punishment, I retorted the manifest injustice of unpaid and enforced labor; the brutal inhumanity of allowing a man to strip and lash a woman, the mother of ten children; to exact from her, toil, which was to maintain in luxury two idle young men, the owners of the plantation. (160–161)

I want to put pressure on Kemble’s rhetorical self-consciousness: she checks her own argument at the very moment when she interrupts Butler’s efforts to silence her. That word “resorted” is powerful. It suggests Kemble resigns herself to “the abstract question” she once prioritized before arriving in Georgia and advocating for Teresa, but her antislavery appeals have changed. Kemble finds herself countering Butler’s systemic argument with her own: “the abstract question” that she raises is in direct response to his point that she cannot threaten “the whole system.” Her systemic argument may be right in principle, but it is impersonal and insufficient when she is acting on behalf of individual women. Perhaps that’s why this sentence ends with the specific injustices that plague Teresa and the “two idle young men” who capitalize on this system. Kemble’s feminist readers have long celebrated her systemic critique as what makes the *Journal* so remarkable (see Clinton “Journal” 76–77). Yet what makes it even more remarkable is the fact that she also becomes sensitive to the potential limitations of systemic critique: the risk of effacing the individual, human details of individual, human lives with silencing abstractions.

<32>The silence Kemble feels in this moment is made more real and more permanent later, when she explains that her husband “has declined receiving any of the people’s petitions through me” (210). Kemble agonizes over what actually precipitates this decision. She wonders whether Butler “is weary of hearing what he has never heard before” about “creatures whose common humanity with his own I half think he does not believe” (210). She also wonders whether the people he enslaves were or will be better without her. Kemble doubts her

intercessions in more explicit terms than ever before: “How well they have done without my advocacy, the conditions which I see with my own eyes, even more than their pitiful petitions, demonstrate” (210). While Kemble criticizes Butler’s cruel accusations (the women’s “stories” are lies, he argues, and she is foolish to believe them), she internalizes his skepticism about her advocacy (210). “I must return to the North,” Kemble writes, “for my condition would be almost worse than theirs—condemned to hear and see so much wretchedness, not only without the means of alleviating it, but without permission even to represent it for alleviation: this is no place for me, since I was not born among slaves, and cannot bear to live among them” (210–211). Kemble distances herself from Butler and from the institution of slavery as whole—as she has in other appeals to Sedgwick—by reasserting her Englishness. Here, she also claims a sense of belonging to the North that she once rejected. Kemble is homesick for places where people cannot fathom life among slaves, as she has had to do. At the same time, Kemble’s self-pitying belief that “her condition would be almost worse” than the slaves for whom she advocates betrays her own persistent naïveté: she identifies so closely with them that she oversimplifies the privilege afforded to her as a white woman. It’s interesting, then, that at this moment when she so casually appropriates slaves’ “wretchedness” as her own, she also differentiates between “alleviating it” and securing “permission even to represent it for alleviation” (211). In this way, she subtly reasserts herself to Sedgwick as narrator at the moment when Butler denies her an audience for the women’s stories. Kemble remains sensitive to the potential of representation to effect change, if only from a distance.

<33>Kemble worries over Butler’s refusal to hear further appeals. What alarms her even more than this decision is the fact that he also reneges on the critical point he made during their conversation about Teresa: that Kemble is not responsible for the slaves’ petitions or for their punishments. Butler now insists that Kemble has aggravated their hardships: “He says that bringing their complaints to me, and the sight of my credulous commiseration, only tend to make them discontented and idle, and brings renewed chastisement upon them; and that so, instead of really befriending them, I am only preparing more suffering for them whenever I leave the place, and they can no more cry to me for help” (211). Kemble circles back to this cruel indictment again and again. Ultimately, it prompts an unexpected and empowering realization: Butler’s decision to silence her—in order to silence the slaves’ complaints—proves just how serious a threat she is to the status quo. Kemble speculates that Butler “is afraid of the mere contagion of freedom which breathes from the very existence of those who are free; my way of speaking to the people, of treating them, or living with them, the appeals I make to their sense of truth, of duty, of self-respect, the infinite compassion and the human consideration I feel for them [...]” (211). In fact, she remembers that Oden “once almost hinted to me, my existence among slaves was an element of danger to the ‘institution’” (211). Part of Kemble’s desperation at this moment may be, then, that she realizes her appeals to Butler and Oden are still powerful, even when they do not effect the immediate changes she desires.[\(11\)](#)

<34>Kemble continues to advocate for women on Butler Island, but she revises her tactics and her roles in the intercessions. In the past, Kemble reported her conversations with slaves to Butler and Oden. After talking with Butler, she reverses this habit, reporting her husband’s stance to Mary and the other women who ask for help. “At length I told them that Mr. [Butler]

had forbidden me to bring him any more complaints from them,” Kemble writes, “for that he thought the ease with which I received and believed their stories only tended to make them discontented, and that, therefore, I feared I could not promise to take their petitions to him [...]” (223). It’s surprising that she is so forthright, since the news reveals his cruelty and her powerlessness in her marriage. Kemble doesn’t leave her disclosure at this: she tells the women “that they had better come then sometime when I was with him, and say what they had just been saying to me [...]” (223). Kemble’s intermediary roles shift with this strategy: she’s not the listener, the speaker, or the actor. Instead, she’s a witness who resists complicity—counter-intuitively—with her silence.

<35>Kemble’s even more mediated advocacy is an incalculable risk. Even if she can protect these women with her presence, she cannot guarantee that Butler won’t punish them later, whether he suspects her involvement or not. Still, I don’t read her solution as naïve resignation. Kemble’s call for the women to speak for themselves may be prompted by Butler’s decision, but it also reflects her intensifying identification with them: “I had my cry out for them, for myself, for *us*. All these women had had large families, and *all* of them had lost half their children, and several of them had lost more” (223, Kemble’s emphasis). Yet, as always, this cry for sympathy prompts an inward reflection. “How I do ponder upon the strange fate which has brought me here,” she continues, “from so far away, from surroundings so curiously different—how my own people in that blessed England of my birth would marvel if they could suddenly have a vision of me as I sit here, and how sorry some of them would be for me!” (223). Kemble’s appeals for us to read her as English are familiar enough. What she imagines us wondering (“the strange fate” that led her to Georgia and will lead her from this place) is, however, more unusual. She is wondering about her own narrative trajectory.

<36>In fact, not long after this provocative “*us*,” we read a series of passages that actually take the difficulties of her narrative project as their subject. At one point she confides in Sedgwick: “I make no comment on these terrible stories, my dear friend, and tell them to you as nearly as possible in the perfectly plain, unvarnished manner in which they are told to me. I do not wish to add to, or perhaps I ought to say take away from, the effect of such narrations by amplifying the simple horror and misery of their bare details” (238–239). At another, she writes that she needs not just words but also people’s voices to humanize what she observes: “I have written down the woman’s words; I wish I could write down the voice and look of abject misery with which they were spoken” (270). Here, Kemble also distinguishes “the story” she hears as a story (“a thing long past and over”), not as “a complaint” (270). By this point, Kemble has learned to listen to women’s stories, not as affronts to her privacy, or as exigencies that require her mediation to Butler, to Sedgwick, and to us, but as entities on their own that resist even her best attempts at representation. “I make no comment; what need, or can I add, to such stories?” Kemble asks, with almost palpable desperation; “But how is such a state of things to endure? And again, how is it to end?” (270). That last question haunts the text—in the wake of Psyche’s story, Teresa’s, and the other women I have not studied in detail—because we don’t know what happens to them after Kemble leaves Georgia and the *Journal* ends.<sup>(12)</sup> This is something Kemble worries over at several points, none more touching than when she muses, “I have let my letter lie since I wrote the above, dear E[lizabeth]; but as mine is a story without

beginning, middle, or end, it matters extremely little where I leave it off or where I take it up [...]” (287). In this moment, Kemble anticipates critics like Donna Stanton, who urges us to read autobiography as a necessarily “un-ended” and “fragmentary” genre (qtd. in Booth 248). That may be the take-home message about the stories—the partial biographies—nested within Kemble’s *Journal*.

<37>While Kemble’s authorship—the composition and ultimately the publication of this *Journal*—may be her greatest intercession, she constantly worries about the efficacy of her own prose. “I wonder,” she confides in Sedgwick in January 1839, “if my mere narration can make your blood boil as the facts did mine?” (76). We should wonder about that “mereness,” the moments when she slips in and out as storyteller, as listener, and especially as intermediary, for *these* are also the moments when she reckons most powerfully with her own complicity, negotiating an abolitionism that humanizes systemic critiques with individual women’s stories. Ta-Nehisi Coates urges us to imagine these partial biographies in his powerful book *Between the World and Me*, a memoir written as a letter to his son. At one point, Coates decries our impulse to impersonalize the magnitude of the system in our collective memories as abstractions: “Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh” (69). He draws a portrait of a woman, humanizing her in a way the word itself cannot. “It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own,” Coates writes, “who prefers the way light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dress-making and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone” (69–70). Coates implores us to pause over histories that elide the individual for the institution, to look this woman in the face. He calls for the kind of structural, but not impersonal, critiques that Kemble tries to realize through her intercessions. Psyche and Teresa, mediated they may be, ask us to listen, still, between the lines.

<38>For however mediated, troubling, and self-serving Kemble’s first-hand observations are, and however she strays from her alleged “purpose” in certain moments, her narrative project worries, again and again, over the inadequacy of her own words before these women’s violated bodies. In our current media landscape—where the very idea of a fact and the very process of “*fact hunting*” and discerning fact from fiction seem so controversial—Kemble’s book, with its contested reception history, is more urgent than ever. She calls on us to read with layered sensitivities: to understand her past and her present (1830s and 1860s), and ours, through one another; her personal and her political exigencies, and ours, through one another; and the systemic “abstractions” that we must confront in order to resist oppression as necessarily linked to individual “stories,” however unfinished their telling may be.

#### Endnotes

(1) Harper Brothers advertised the *Journal* as such in the *Independent*, celebrating its unmediated “facts”: “There is no excuse, no palliation of facts but the whole system is laid bare and quivering before the eye. So faithful and final a witness we have not had. Even Uncle Tom’s

Cabin is only founded upon fact. The *Journal of Mrs. Kemble* is fact itself” (qtd. in Cate 3–4; Lombard 335). ([^](#))

(2)In 1960, Margaret Davis Cate excoriated the *Journal*, writing that it perpetuates the “mistakes” Kemble ascribes to Martineau. Cate reads Kemble’s inaccuracies as anti-south propaganda, challenging her credibility full stop: “Can anyone know *fact* from *fiction* in Mrs. Kemble’s *Journal*?” (17). John Scott quickly published two pieces refuting Cate’s argument and inspiring waves of contemporary scholarship. ([^](#))

(3)Catherine Clinton is the first to read Kemble’s arguments as intersectional feminism: “If we choose to look, we can see Kemble’s text as more than descriptive, as analysis of a most powerful, political variety. And we can employ her evidence to extend our own analysis of the interdependence of systems of exploitation, the ways in which gender, race, and class interacted within nineteenth-century southern society” (“*Journal*” 79). ([^](#))

(4)Clinton and David address Kemble’s “complicity” (see Clinton, *Civil Wars* 77; David 155, 158, and 170). ([^](#))

(5)For this reason, it was excerpted/republished in a pamphlet edited by the Union League of Philadelphia (DeSpain 130). For a broader discussion of Kemble’s “episodic narrative,” see Booth (229–231). ([^](#))

(6)See, for instance, Mildred Lombard’s discussion of Harriet, Teresa, and Psyche (35–36); Winifred Morgan’s of Psyche and Teresa (36–37); David’s of Psyche and Mary (159) and Psyche and Teresa (169–170); and DeSpain’s of Psyche and Mary (129). DeSpain shows how nineteenth-century pamphlets popularized this approach: “Because of the intimacy of Kemble’s time on the plantation, the Union League pamphlet’s editor frames her as the intermediary through whom the slave women can relate their stories—an opportunity that Butler never gave her. The editor chooses portions from the journal where the slaves have names, identities, and histories of mistreatment” (131). ([^](#))

(7)In fact, this is the second of two back-to-back conversations with women that Kemble stresses she doesn’t initiate. ([^](#))

(8)For the connections among disability studies, enslaved women’s “grotesque bodies,” and “the father of modern gynecology” see Rachel Dudley’s important work on “the medical plantation.” I offer this context, not to encourage textual diagnosis, but to historicize Teresa’s appeals within interdisciplinary scholarship. ([^](#))

(9)Kemble expresses frustration with the widespread assumption that slaves are liars, a stereotype that is beyond the scope of this essay. For more on this passage, see Kemble (155) and Clinton (“*Fanny Kemble’s Journal*” 77). ([^](#))

(10)Some readers emphasize her decision *not* to advocate for the women once she realizes the consequences of interceding. Booth writes that “she is forced to abandon most of her efforts on the slaves’ behalf, as it brings harsher treatment to those she would help” (239). Clinton similarly writes that “it alarmed her that struggling for reform often had an opposite effect: her interventions might get a slave whipped—or worse” (“Journal” 77).<sup>(^)</sup>

(11)Kemble scholars have connected her identities as mistress and as narrator to asides about her reform failures. “The system depends on her ineffectuality,” Booth writes; “the mistress not only may but must be useless to sharpen the definition of slave labor” (238–239). DeSpain amplifies this logic: “Part of what gave Kemble’s English identity such veracity for audiences was her failure at maintaining distance or making a difference on the plantation” (120).<sup>(^)</sup>

(12)In March 1859, Mortimer Thomson traveled to Savannah as an undercover journalist for the *New-York Daily Tribune* in order to report the auction of nearly 800 slaves from Butler’s rice and cotton plantations: the largest slave auction in U.S. history. Thomson signed his article Q.K. Philander Doesticks and republished it as a pamphlet—and as “a sequel” to Kemble’s *Journal*—four years later. Doesticks lists the names, ages, and identifying features of many slaves who appear in Kemble’s *Journal*, but there is no trace of Psyche or Teresa. For discussions of the Weeping Time, see Bell 311–340; Clinton 159–162; David 256–257, 268; and especially Kwesi DeGraft-Hanson.<sup>(^)</sup>

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