

REVIEW ESSAY

Getting History's Words Right: Diaries of Emilie Davis

Memorable Days: The Emilie Davis Diaries, <http://davisdiaries.villanova.edu>.
Transcribed and annotated by the MEMORABLE DAYS PROJECT, directed
by JUDITH GIESBERG. (Villanova University, 2012. Free website.)

*Emilie Davis's Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia,
1863–1865*. Edited by JUDITH GIESBERG, transcribed and annotated by
the MEMORABLE DAYS PROJECT EDITORIAL TEAM. (University Park:
Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. 240 pp. Illustrations, notes,
bibliography, index. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$16.65.)

*Notes from a Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Frances
Davis*. By KARSONYA WISE WHITEHEAD. (Columbia: University of
South Carolina Press, 2014. 280 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography,
index. \$39.95.)

A REMARKABLE HISTORICAL SOURCE came to light in 1999, when the Historical Society of Pennsylvania acquired pocket diaries for 1863, 1864, and 1865, kept by a young African American woman in Philadelphia. These are small, preprinted books, three dates to a page, that Emilie Davis filled with notes about herself, friends and family, the preachers, teachers, and doctors in her community, the lectures and concerts she attended, and the Civil War. Although it is rare for someone to be such a faithful diarist for just three years, and despite evidence in the diary that Davis also wrote countless letters to friends and family, so far the three wartime diaries are all that we have of Davis. Their survival is highly unusual; that they open a new door into Philadelphia's midcentury African American community makes them invaluable; and that they give voice to a

young, literate woman who, in many respects, owns the city streets makes them extraordinary.¹

With good reason, Emilie Davis's diaries attracted attention as a source that would find a wide audience, and now, readers have her daily notes available in three versions. Two handsome print editions of the diaries are on the market. Karsonya Wise Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Frances Davis*, intersperses years of the diary among chapters about Emilie's life.² Judith Giesberg and the Memorable Days Project, *Emilie Davis's Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863–1865*, delivers the diary's text with minimal explanatory notes.³ In addition, and free of charge, anyone with Internet access can visit *Memorable Days: The Emilie Davis Diaries*, a site by the same people who prepared *Emilie Davis's Civil War* that presents images of the original handwritten pages alongside transcribed and annotated text.⁴

It is unusual to have multiple editions of one historical document published at the same time; to transcribe a handwritten source in order to render it accurately in modern type is painstaking work. Many people may ask, why do it twice? It is more unusual still to have editors simultaneously publish distinctly different texts from the same source. Here is Emilie Davis's entry for January 2, 1865, as it appears in the three publications:

Variant A: lovely day home all morning very busy i wrote to brother and sister yesterday and tomy to night comes off the long gatherd of Celebration by the [...] it was very grand (*Memorable Days* site)

Variant B: lovely day home all morning very busy i wrote to brother and sister yesterday and tomy to night comes off the long talked of Celebration by the banneker institute it was very grand (*Emilie Davis's Civil War*)

¹No one has revealed yet the record of the diaries' ownership over the last century and a quarter.

²Karsonya Wise Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Frances Davis* (Columbia, SC, 2014). For this book, Whitehead, who also publishes with the given name Kaye, won the 2014 Letitia Woods Brown Book Award for Best Edited Book in African American history from the Association of Black Women Historians.

³Judith Giesberg and the Memorable Days Project Editorial Team, *Emilie Davis's Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863–1865* (University Park, PA, 2014).

⁴*Memorable Days: The Emilie Davis Diaries*, <http://davisdiaries.villanova.edu>. In most citations to the diaries, I provide the date of an entry rather than its page number in order to facilitate comparisons among the versions.

Variant C: Lovely day. Home all morning. Very busy, I wrote to Father and Sister yesterday and Tomy. Tonight it comes off, the long awaited Celebration by the Banneker Institute. It was very grand. (*Notes from a Colored Girl*)

Woe is she who finds occasion to quote that passage. The editors did not see the same things on the page. Did Emilie write to her brother or her father? Did she think the celebration was “long gathered,” “long talked of,” or “long awaited”? Adding confusion are disagreements between the editors about basic data. They differ as to the name of Emilie’s father, and that is just the beginning.⁵

These divergent results are unsettling. Is history usually this wobbly? Are words on historical pages this uncertain as a rule? These are not the differences of interpretation and viewpoint that historians embrace as intellectual exercise and self-improvement. In this case, the raw elements of history, its primary sources, have gone through competing refineries with inconsistent output. How does this happen? Davis’s diaries are dense and difficult texts that put historical craftsmanship to the test. By looking at the source itself and at choices made by the editors, aspects of historical research and the customs of editing historical texts come into focus.

At the start, no one knew about the diarist except as a name she inscribed in her books.⁶ The Historical Society’s finding aid to its collection 3030, *Emilie Davis Diaries*, preserves that initial puzzlement in the processing note:

City directories, census, and church records were researched, but no record of Emilie Davis was found. She wrote of going to church and mentioned some churches by name, but never stated the name of the church she attended. An investigation of a likely church (using the name of her minister) revealed that pre-1870 records had been destroyed in a fire.⁷

Historians and genealogists alike will recognize the path that the society’s volunteer followed into historical lists; many a quest to solve mysteries

⁵ Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis’s Civil War*, xix, identifies Emilie’s father as Isaac Davis. Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 221, identifies him as Charles Davis.

⁶ It is unclear at what stage of acquisition and by what means the author’s race became evident. Davis rarely refers to her race.

⁷ *Emilie Davis Diaries* (Collection 3030), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, finding aid, http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/findingaid3030davis.pdf.

about race, residence, occupation, neighbors, and beliefs begins in those records. At a dead end there, the search for Emilie Davis turned back on itself to scour her diaries for more clues to their author. A later paragraph in the society's guide, under the heading "Background," is built of such self-referential information:

Little is known about Emilie Davis. She was born on February 18 in an unknown year and was most likely in her late teens or early twenties when she began her diary in 1863. She seems to have lived alone but occasionally stayed with the family for whom she was working. She was educated, enjoyed reading, and also attended night school. She enjoyed spending time with her friends, attended church regularly, and occasionally went to lectures and concerts. Davis enjoyed music and singing, and eventually learned to play the guitar.⁸

Every element in that passage is available in the diaries, and nothing in that passage is gleaned from other sources—with the possible exception of the guess about her age. Anyone over thirty-five would, no doubt, recognize Emilie's age. To have time for friends and be among them is vital to her happiness.

In her diary, Emilie Davis perfected vagueness as if it were an art. Consider her entries for the first month, January 1863. Faithful in showing up for a class each Monday night, she omits to say what she studies. As noted in the Historical Society's guide, Emilie never identifies the church she attended each week. The lay of the land is mysterious. Emilie occupies unidentified space: she is "here" and friends come "up" to call on her. In another direction, "home," where her father lives, is "down"; she goes down home to see him. School is also down. She visits a few other homes, hears a lecture, and attends church, all without tipping anyone off about distances, streets, or even up and down. Nothing in the entries of January points to a city or neighborhood or street.

No one else living "here" enters the story this month; Emilie is alone, away from her family, with no hint at an explanation. At "here" Emilie receives callers nearly every day and once mentions serving tea to a guest (January 26). That cup of tea is the only food or drink she notes in the entire month. In fact, she rarely discusses the dailiness of life—food, sleep, bathing, grooming—at all. She names at least thirty people (the Marys

⁸ Ibid.

are difficult to differentiate) in the pages for January, most of them by given name only. Nowhere in the diary can readers discover an identity for Emilie's best friend, Nellie, who appears, according to the calculations of Kaye Whitehead, 504 times in its pages.⁹ Emilie has dressmaking skills. On Saturdays in that January she keeps busy sewing on a dress for herself; one Thursday, she helps Nellie buy dress fabric and then cuts out the parts for her friend to sew. In this month, nothing suggests that she earned money by sewing or other work. Students of diaries sometimes state that diaries tend to record the unexpected moments in life, not the dishwashing or diapers. With that hypothesis, one might decide that Emilie's job is the predictable background noise that merits no mention. But if her schedule for January is plotted, she has almost no time left for a job.

The document is also difficult because its daily entries, crammed three to a page in a small book, are hard to decipher. Reading the diaries, as someone evidently did to prepare the Historical Society's finding aid, is one thing; transcribing them is another. A reader can extract some meaning when a number of words come together, regardless of imaginative spelling, slips of the pen, or letters rubbed away. A transcriber must see every detail in order to represent the author's work. When an author writes in a standard style, some of the scribbles on a page can be translated on the basis of a dictionary and/or what is known about the person's vocabulary and customary syntax. But idiosyncratic writing is a different animal: the author may try out variant spellings, create her own shorthand, write phonetically, mimic local accents, and more. Until patterns are evident, the transcriber cannot guess that noun and verb will agree, for example; that routine decision must be made in every instance.

Emilie Davis wrote in cursive script, most of the time with pen and ink. Her spelling was not standard, but her misspellings had some consistency—a single letter “p” in “stoped” and “shoped,” for example, and needless vowels in “buisey” or “buisy.” She obviously believed that hers were “pleasent” or “plesent” days. She exhibited the very common quirk in handwriting that her letters “o” and “a” are now indistinguishable. For some reason she rarely capitalized the first person singular “I” but always took the time to dot her preferred “i.” And in another challenge familiar to editors, her capital letters are often hard to distinguish from lowercase and rather erratically deployed. Punctuation held no interest for her at all,

⁹Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, xvi.

and she treated margins of the page as of no moment: if she wrote “w-a-n-t-e” and reached the edge of her page, she started the next line with the uprooted letter “d.” Similarly, if she had more to say than was allotted by the diary for that day, she concluded in the next space. This combination of writing practices produces entries like this one for January 3, 1863, here in the variant from *Emilie Davis’s Civil War*:

all there very Pleasent this morning buisey all day reading and his were her
to service i went down home to see if father had begun and was coming
away when

Emilie Davis made it very difficult to extract the narrative and cast of characters in her life.

Why bother to edit this difficult text? Why would multiple scholars set out to read and transcribe the diary, render it legible for others, and contextualize its story? One perfectly good answer is, because it’s there—or, put another way, because one “encounters documents that are simply too good to leave hidden in an archive.”¹⁰ American historians have edited and published significant texts since the eighteenth century both to preserve and to share historical evidence. The diary of a free black woman in Philadelphia would not have met eighteenth-century measures of value, but that transaction of editing texts to put them in circulation survives as one mode of historical scholarship. Sources that merit an edition and publication today, particularly those that are not a “long-lost letter of Thomas Jefferson” or its equivalent, are likely to be multifaceted, even kaleidoscopic texts to which readers and researchers are drawn for all sorts of reasons. Editors sense possibilities in the text and open the door to the historical evidence. They anticipate their readers. Emilie Davis’s diaries might be plumbed for details of city life, domestic service, or religious practice that are not evidenced elsewhere. Perhaps they will be searched for one woman’s rarely documented perspective on familiar institutions, wartime events, or work. One reader will pick up the diaries to look at details about how friends and family kept in touch and recognize its evidence of an informal postal system that carried Emilie’s letters around the city (September 7, 17, 30, 1863). Someone will want to quote Emilie’s realization that a seamstress at a sewing machine tired very quickly of sitting

¹⁰ Michael E. Stevens and Steven B. Burg, *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA, 1997), 18.

(July 19, 1864). Another reader will form ideas about what impels Emilie and her circle to visit a doctor (October 19, 1863). Someone else will delve into patterns of work that have white families hiring black servants like Emilie just for the summers. The best editing prepares for them all.

At work on *Notes from a Colored Girl*, first as her dissertation, Kaye Whitehead was captivated by the diary's power to reveal a black woman situated among family and friends in a city and engaged with the institutions of Philadelphia's African Americans. Emilie's ordinary life, Whitehead writes, "has been rendered extraordinary simply because it has survived"; by keeping a diary, Emilie Davis "moved from invisibility to visibility" and inserted herself into modern quests to understand the lives of "everyday, working-class free black American women."¹¹ She treats Emilie, on the one hand, as an individual who squabbles with friends, endures physical pain, worries about her father's health, and occasionally resents her employer, and, on the other hand, as a means to explore Davis's world and the subjectivity of a person in her social situation.¹² *Notes from a Colored Girl* incorporates the text of the diaries, a year at a time, and surrounds Emilie's words with Whitehead's chapters for which they are inspiration and evidence. She picks up the diaries as artifacts and explores the history of pocket diaries, pens, ink, and pencils, making the point, among others, that there were costs associated with keeping these books. She notices Emilie's use of "up" and "down" to describe the horizontal plane of city streets and thinks about them as possible indicators of location. She works especially hard to assign surnames to Emilie's friends and then, where possible, extend her research to learn something of them. Given Davis's frequent references to dressmaking, Whitehead explores the craft, its terms of art, and its occupational hierarchies. Not a customary edition that makes the primary source the main attraction, Whitehead's exploration of the world of Emilie Davis as revealed in her diaries is a lively look at a time and place as well as an individual.

¹¹ Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 1.

¹² Although it is Judith Giesberg who evokes the historian and writer Jill Lepore as her project's muse, the distinctions Lepore draws between microhistory and biography are more pertinent to Kaye Whitehead's use of the diaries "as a means to exploring the culture," in Lepore's words. Something larger than the individual is, in Whitehead's practice, revealed by the diary itself, in the everyday experience of Emilie Davis. See Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 129–44, quotation p. 141; and Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, xxiv.

When Judith Giesberg began work on the diary in 2012, Kaye Whitehead had completed her dissertation and was revising it for publication.¹³ As a historian of the era and a teacher, Giesberg designed an imaginative classroom collaboration for graduate students in the Department of History at Villanova University to edit and present the diaries, initially on the *Memorable Days* website. The title page of *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, the book to come of the same collaboration, tags Giesberg the editor, while the Memorable Days Project Editorial Team, made up of herself and five students, takes credit for transcribing and annotating the text. This Villanova team took a narrow view of the diaries' evidentiary value. In the introduction signed by Giesberg, Davis's diaries are described as records of the Civil War, to be "mine[d] . . . for events we deem *newsworthy* about the Civil War" (italics in original).¹⁴ Or, in another formulation, it is the entries about the war that "make the diary and its author worth a closer look."¹⁵ She even anticipates that her readers might grow "impatient for war news."¹⁶ In this view, Emilie Davis's individuality and identity are beside the point, her work and friends of little moment. Moreover, sticking to the Civil War is an easier path for editors. Events are known by other means, and the diary reflects a familiar structure consisting of moments "we deem *newsworthy*," in Giesberg's phrase. Even Emilie Davis's artistic vagueness cannot obscure such milestones as the Emancipation Proclamation, the penetration of Confederate troops into Pennsylvania, the founding of the United States Colored Troops, or Lincoln's assassination.

With two books and a website devoted to her, Emilie Davis is still kind of hazy and unknown, with basic identifiers such as occupation and residence uncertain. But enough about a real person emerged from the editors' work to situate her diaries in a recognizable time and place, a context, that shaped her experiences and her observations. The editors recognized that in official records her name was often given as Emily, and with that

¹³The date comes from Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, xiii. For Whitehead's visibility as a scholar then at work on the diaries, see Kaye Wise Whitehead, "Reconstructing the Life of a Colored Woman: The Pocket Diaries of Emilie F. Davis," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135 (2011): 561–64.

¹⁴Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, 3.

¹⁵Ibid., 3. Giesberg made similar points about the project in an article, "The Civil War at 150," for the online journal *Common-Place. The Interactive Journal of Early American Life*, <http://www.common-place.org/vol-14/no-02/giesberg/>. Davis's diary "would make it possible to tell a new story about the Civil War. . . . We saw the Civil War through her eyes."

¹⁶Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, 5.

adjustment, the federal census of 1860 yielded up a likely candidate for the author: a mulatto servant, age twenty-one, living in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward with other Davises whose given names pop up in the diary. Military records matched Emilie's references to her brothers in the Union navy. The lectures she mentions could be linked to events publicized at the Banneker Institute. In the rare instances where she supplies a surname for her friends and associates, she signals acquaintance with some of the best-known and leading members of Philadelphia's African American community. Deaths and marriages among her acquaintances were sometimes found in city records, and eventually researchers turned up what looks to be Emilie's own wedding, a year after the diaries end.

Context expands what readers can understand about Emilie Davis's situation and also informs the transcription of her text. Her regular but unspecified lessons at Mr. Lively's house (mentioned first at November 22, 1864) tell more about what matters to her once research revealed him to be Addison W. Lively, "colored" music teacher, vocal conductor, and political activist, whose documented deeds include leading the Shiloh Baptist Church Sabbath School choir and providing entertainment at a Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League gala.¹⁷ Context also shapes how well the editors read this difficult text. Between posting a transcript of Davis's entry for January 2, 1865 (above), on the *Memorable Days* site and sending *Emilie Davis's Civil War* to print sometime later, research improved the text; [...], indicating illegible words, became "Banneker Institute." With knowledge of Emilie's community and its institutions, the difficult shapes of her words came into focus.

Context can be friends and family. Readers begin to feel that they know Emilie's friends, but nearly every identification is educated guesswork, made more difficult by women's smaller presence in the public record and habit of changing their names upon marriage. Kaye Whitehead takes many more risks than the *Memorable Days* team to identify people around Davis. Bigger risks lead to bigger errors. The crowd of women named Mary among Emilie's acquaintances occasionally requires even Emilie to distinguish them by adding an initial. Whitehead's transcription of January 13,

¹⁷ See Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 225. Also see *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 7, 1865, where Lively is billed as the "Vocal Conductor" for an upcoming event of the State Equal Rights League. Whitehead believes that Lively taught Davis to play the guitar, but Lively could be teaching her singing, his specialty. Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, 90, adds a note to say that Davis "does not mention specifically what kind of lessons she was taking."

1863, reads in part, “Mary G, and her son were here. How glad I was to see them, he is a fine boy.” She is so sure she sees the letter “G” and then so sure she knows Mary’s identity that she expands the initial to “G(rew)” in this entry and simply uses “Grew” for all subsequent occurrences of the initial. This Mary reappears several times, most notably on November 4, 1863: “Very busy all day cleaning up the house, Mary Grew and I,” after the death of Emilie’s sister-in-law. Whitehead identifies Mary Grew simply as a member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁸ This is an unlikely identification. That Mary Grew (perhaps there were others) was a fifty-year-old, white, single woman without any children. A distinguished abolitionist in an interracial antislavery society, she nonetheless seems an improbable prospect for helping Emilie to clean her sister’s house. The Memorable Days team read Mary’s initial as a “J” and left her unidentified.

A surprising weakness in both books is the absence of customary indicators about how the editors know something or think they know something. The aforementioned difference over the name of Emilie’s father is a case in point: nothing in the books guides the reader to grasp how the editors reached different conclusions or what steps the next researcher might take to settle the matter. In another example, Davis spent four months of 1864 in Germantown, working for a Mrs. Wister, in a job she disliked. The cautious Memorable Days team suggests that she may have worked for Owen and Sarah Butler Wister. Whitehead asserts it as fact: Emilie worked for Sarah.¹⁹ Both editors leave readers to guess on what basis this is suspected or known. Historians do not usually hide their evidence and clues. That record of research is offered in part as witness to their own good intentions: you may check my work, if you desire. But in such a complex case as these diaries, it also maps out the research already undertaken so that further work need not repeat. Since neither editor indicates whether she consulted the Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s extensive Wister and Butler Families Papers to learn if Davis’s employer could be confirmed by any intersection of events, the next historian might risk repeating a fruitless search.

The Memorable Days team spelled out its standards for providing context through annotation to Emilie’s text in their “Note on Method”: “We

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 20, 224.

¹⁹ Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis’s Civil War*, 100, and Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 159–60.

generally chose to annotate when we thought readers would benefit from the context or when we hoped an annotation would help them make a connection that would have been clear to Emilie or her contemporaries.”²⁰ The restraint speaks to a model very different from Kaye Whitehead’s idea of encasing the diary in a book about the lives in it; it is more akin to what usually guides historical editors, except that the plan presumes that the diaries are valuable for their occasional observations about the Civil War. It is also a little vague. Sometimes the context that readers need becomes evident from close attention to the text itself. One of Davis’s complaints about life with Mrs. Wister is her isolation, not only from her friends in the city but also from new friends in Germantown. These are months filled with emotions, adjustments, and puzzling pieces of information. Suddenly, on July 8, 1864, there appears a cryptic entry after a talk with her employer: “I see i will not be able to spend the sumer in germantown.” In what follows, there is nothing about a new job, a relocation of the family, or packing to move; there may be change, however, in her ability to see her home friends, as if she were now closer to them. If Emilie worked for Mrs. Wister the entire summer, did she stay in Germantown to do so? Could the Wisters have moved into a different house? This is context at the heart of Emilie’s story that would benefit readers. Maybe the next person inspired to learn about Emilie Davis’s working life will try to answer those questions.

An editor’s own interest in a text sometimes works against his attention to context, even to context that is reasonably accessible. Emilie Davis’s activities over three wartime years very often involve transportation other than walking, and the editors ignore the subject. Emilie and her friends make frequent trips between Center City and Germantown, for example. How did one make that trip in the 1860s? What did it cost? The editors notice her use of the term “the cars” (May 1–2, 1863, June 7, 1864, January 26, 1865, August 12–13, 14, 1865), usually reserved for trolleys, and because streetcars in Philadelphia were restricted by race and the site of intense civil rights agitation to desegregate them, that mode of transport has received historical attention and acquired a bibliography.²¹ But what cars are these? Many routes are known, historic transportation is a popular subject, and maps are treasured; this context could have been provided. A train takes her to Harrisburg, or so one deduces from her use of the

²⁰ Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis’s Civil War*, xxiv.

²¹ Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 8–9, offers some thoughts about streetcars as affordable transportation and how they opened up the city to connect neighborhoods, but there are no details specific to Davis’s stories.

term “depot” (December 25, 1865). How long a trip was that by train in 1865 and what did it cost? The uncredited indexer of *Emilie Davis’s Civil War* thought the topic was important, but he or she had little to point to. Entries for “travel, by train,” refer readers to several entries such as Emilie’s return from Harrisburg on that Christmas Day, when Vincent met her at “the Depot.” There’s nothing more there about Emilie’s trip, not even the word “train.”

Context expresses what the editor thinks is important. A case can be made that what matters most—where editorial energy should be concentrated, in these diaries or any other rich historical source—is precisely that which is new and surprising. The missed opportunities in these editions are the insights and hints about domestic service that Emilie Davis provides and invites readers to explore. Davis’s experience as a working woman does not alter how readers understand the Civil War. Furthermore, to research one domestic servant through multiple employing families would be a herculean task. Few diaries of free black women exist, it is true, but they likely outnumber the diaries of mid-nineteenth-century servants of any race. For two months in 1863, Emilie lived with a Mr. and Mrs. Harris, presumably as a domestic servant and not the family’s only servant. She makes no reference to children and notes very little about her duties: dusting on August 27, sewing on September 3, washing windows on October 1. Who is this family and where do they live? As usual, Emilie offers only the slimmest clues. She is in the country, relatively speaking, and she can walk to the Falls. Editors of both books chose the entry for August 14 to add a note explaining that Emilie’s employer lived at East Falls on the Schuylkill River, though Emilie never says so.²² Neither editor pushes beyond the scant hints about this job, yet this is a rich section of the diary that merits more attention. The weeks near the Falls offer rare examples of Emilie Davis observing unfamiliar surroundings and people. The neighborhood is so white that she is prompted to refer to her own color (August 23). Away from her own church, she experiments with different denominations, including a stop at the Schuylkill Falls Methodist Episcopal Church one Sunday (September 27). Though living in, Emilie is hardly less confined than when she resides alone in Center City. Her employer seems to

²²Whitehead reproduces several times an error that must be one of copyediting, not research, when she states that the Harris family lived in Harrisburg. She contradicts herself, even on a single page. At August 13, she reads the entry to say that Emilie set off for Harrisburg, and at August 14, she states that her new employer lived at East Falls. See Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, 45.

live in a whole neighborhood of families employing servants. She quickly acquires a new set of friends with whom she goes for ice cream and takes walks, downhill to the Falls and uphill toward Germantown. After she joined friends on one visit, she remarks, “we had a good bit of fun but i think it is the last time i will climb that hill” (September 9). Perhaps the strongest reason to learn more about this job is how much Emilie Davis seems to like Mr. and Mrs. Harris. As her work draws to an end, she pays her employer a revealing compliment: “mrs harris Treated me like a lady she said she was sorry she had to Part with me” (October 6).²³

Even to try situating this story in context is difficult, and it may fail, but to ignore the task diminishes this historical source. If Philadelphia's city directory for 1863 is reliable, only one Harris family lived on the fringes of the city. That was the family of George Harris, a manufacturer, residing on Ridge Avenue in Roxborough. Geographically, that identification works: a neighborhood, the Falls, the hill, and the Methodist Episcopal church are put into place. It is unlikely that certainty could ever be achieved, unless someone in George Harris's family also kept a diary that echoed Emilie's. But a hypothesis is useful, and with his name and address in hand, there are further steps to take. Can his business be learned? Who lives in this household—or who did in 1860 and 1870, when the census was taken? Especially, one might ask about the population of servants in the Harris household. Then, what other evidence about this family, their residence, and the neighborhood can be found? What price is too high to pay in order to learn who are these people that employ Emilie Davis and treat her like a lady?

Central to the purpose of the Emilie Davis books and website is translating the diary's text from rough manuscript to printed page. Styles of transcription range along a spectrum from a conservative, literal practice to an interventionist, standardized representation. Editors generally strive to balance, on one side of the scale, protecting the evidence inscribed on the page—haste, phonetic spelling, ambiguous sentence breaks; and on the opposite side, achieving readability because sharing the valued evidence requires it. Even those editors working with texts by well-educated spelling champions make hundreds of choices about how to render in print what they see in manuscript. Diaries pose extra challenges because it is assumed that their authors wrote for no one but themselves, without paying

²³The quoted passages in this paragraph are from my own transcription of the text.

attention to a putative other who might need to read their entries. Textual scholars for whom a diary is just one type of surviving record, distinguishable from correspondence, manuscript essays, or drafts of books, advise that the text of diaries be reproduced in as literal a manner as possible: “Informal in nature and private in intent, diaries lose rather than gain by any attempt to impose excessive conventions of print publication.”²⁴ Rarely is such a rigid stance effective, however, with texts that break the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Editors of the Freedom Project, who transcribed letters by freed slaves written at the close of the Civil War and published an enviable edition of nonstandard texts, concluded, “The many documents entirely bereft of punctuation require some editorial intervention for the sake of readability.”²⁵ They demonstrated that a dash and a pinch of punctuation does not destroy a text’s authenticity.

The styles of transcription chosen by the editors of Emilie Davis’s diary are illustrated in their representations of the entries for June 4 and 5, 1863 (the spaces for days here separated by an extra line):

Variants A & B: very pleasent Nellie and i went out it has bin a long time sin we went shoping togert i went out to germantown about 6 o had a very plea time vincent

came out for me wich was the pleasent part of the evening Nellie has not bin up here to day i taken sues corset to harrises (*Memorable Days* site and *Emilie Davis’s Civil War*)

Variant C: Very pleasant day. Nellie and I went out. It has been a long time sin(ce) we went shopping toge(ther). I went out to Germantown about 6’o, had a very pleasant time. Vincent came out for me, which was the pleasantis part of the evening.

Nellie has not bin up here to day. I taken Sues skirts off to furnes (furnish). (*Notes from a Colored Girl*)

Putting aside the comical confusion about the final words, the variants record similar experiences—good weather, encounters with friends, a trip out to Germantown, a bit of shopping, and what sounds like courtship

²⁴ Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 1988), 127.

²⁵ *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin et al. (Cambridge, 1985), xxvi.

on Vincent's part. Sometimes the editors preserve the same misspellings and nonstandard elements. Most obviously, the second style introduces the symbols—punctuation and capital letters—that shape the prose into sentences.

In their statement of method, the Memorable Days team (Variants A and B) committed themselves “to preserve as much of the original form of the entries as we thought possible” and therefore “added no punctuation and made very few spelling interventions.”²⁶ Reproducing another person's misspelled words requires a light touch and impeccable consistency. Once the Memorable Days team established that Emilie Davis knew the correct spelling of “Germantown,” and knowing, as it also did, that her “a” and her “o” are basically indistinguishable, what was the point of bouncing back and forth between “germontown” and “germantown”? And if the team is certain that Emilie flip-flopped between “a” and “o” in that word, why are friends named “Mary” never rendered in print as the equally likely “Mory”? Editors should honor the likelihood that the author got it right. Heavy-handed interpretations of Davis's spelling can make a deeper dent in the story than the spelling of Germantown. One disconnection between the two editions concerns whether Emilie Davis worked for or knew a family named Hazard. Whitehead is quite sure she did; Giesberg and the Memorable Days team never consider the matter. Readers can see why by using the index in *Notes from a Colored Girl* to locate pages and dates where the name Hazard purportedly appears and then reading entries for those dates in *Emilie Davis's Civil War* and on the *Memorable Days* site. Very roundabout but necessary. The family's name recurs (or not) in entries written in the summer of 1863 and returns at least once later. There is no doubt that Emilie's handwriting in this instance is challenging, but it is consistent. Seeing the same shapes on July 30, August 1, and August 4, the Memorable Days team translated them as “buzards” on the first date, “hazards” on the next, and “hazerds” on the last. Nearly a year later, on May 28, 1864, the shape returns and becomes “hayards.” Why would anyone imagine an employer in those random syllables?

Conceding nothing to the reader about the start and end of sentences or the start and end of each day's entry, the Memorable Days team promises a literal representation of the handwritten text. Other editors might question that choice, preferring to encourage and help people to read Davis's

²⁶ Giesberg et al., *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, xxiii.

story. But in executing their chosen style the team, in fact, intervenes in significant ways that move the text away from literal. If the team meant to “preserve . . . the original form,” why not preserve Davis’s line breaks, on the chance that readers could find syntax or other meaning in that detail? Instead, they yielded to the customary design of a book page and lines of a standard length (though that cannot explain why they ignored line breaks on their website). The entries of June 4 and 5 illustrate some differences that line breaks can make. The words causing the greatest difficulty to transcribers and appearing incomplete are those squashed against the right margin.

very pleasent Nellie
 and i went out it
 has bin a long time sin
 we went shoping togert
 i went out to german
 town about 6 o had
 a very plea time vincent
 came out for me wich
 was the pleasent part
 of the evening Nellie
 has not bin up here to day
 i taken sues cor
 set to harrises

The team also broke up the dense script on each page of Davis’s diary by introducing a horizontal space between her entries. That airy look, that makes for handsome printed pages, undercuts a key element of the team’s literal style. When Davis wrote June 4 news into the space allotted for June 5, as she did in the example above, the team tried to replicate that practice in print. But on the printed page and on the website, what flowed from the previous entry in the original appears in print as separated by that space between entries. The editors’ attempt at literal representation confuses readers in ways that the manuscript as written never did.

Kaye Whitehead (Variant C, above) took advice from historical editors and experienced teachers of editing before leaning toward a readable text, presenting “a reader-friendly version while still preserving [Emilie’s] intent and style.”²⁷ She designed an attractive and familiar style to invite

²⁷Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, xiii.

readers. In practice, she preserved spelling, “removed random capital letters, and . . . added capitals at the beginning of proper names and places, and at the beginning of what I felt were sentences.”²⁸ There is admirable honesty in that phrase, “what I felt were sentences.” This is an art full of subjectivity. Adding punctuation to this string of words at the end of the entry for January 4, 1865, poses another kind of risk: “called to see me this evening Vincent stopped in.” To which portion do the words “this evening” belong? Is that when someone called on her or when Vincent came by? The editor doesn’t know. Whitehead is willing, in effect, to copyedit Emilie Davis’s punctuation and capitalization. It is risky work. Every time the editor indicates where one entry ends and the next begins, she guesses. Whitehead did learn an important lesson from the editors she consulted: explain what informs that guesswork. Once she noticed that Emilie began most entries with a word or two about the weather, Whitehead used weather as the indicator of a new day and new entry. In the example above, this provides a guide for June 4 but not for June 5, where the entry probably begins with the reference to visitors while the weather gets no mention at all. Whitehead calls upon us to trust her instincts about Davis’s missing syntax.

All the attention to syntax and spelling and sentence structure is pointless if the editors fail to execute a first-rate scheme of proofreading. As one handbook of textual practice notes, “Documentary editing requires consistent and careful execution that offers the reader confidence in the reliability of the printed text.”²⁹ In proofreading, the text is verified by the people most familiar with the author’s idiosyncrasies and with the style set for the edition. Although methods can differ, the general practice is to read aloud from the manuscript, spelling out the nonstandard variants of words and speaking each capital letter and mark of punctuation, while a second person follows the typescript. The reader of the manuscript is, ideally, so familiar with the handwriting that he can respond consistently to that “a” vs. “o” problem in the spelling of Germantown and to all the other ambiguous inscriptions. *Emilie Davis’s Civil War* reads as if the team lacked a consistent eye to set a standard about whether, on May 29, 1864, that is a capital “C” on “Church” in Emilie’s hand or to notice that a transcriber mistakenly lowered the “p” on “Pleasant” in her entry of June 4, 1863. Most of the Memorable Days team’s errors are of this sort, not

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁹ Stevens and Burg, *Editing Historical Documents*, 18.

matters of decoding Davis's scrawl. On February 4, 1863, Davis wrote very clearly that she had been "sewing all the evening"; the team sent that entry to print transcribed as "sewing all this evening." Careful to capture Davis's misplacement of vowels in "patiently" on September 19, 1864, the team published her word as "paitenty," when Davis never mislaid the "l." The entry for September 4, 1863, reads in the original:

very Plesent day no letter from Nellie what the matter be to day we had a grand romp out on the lawn rachel Jonston cam over in the afternoon and ephriam and the rest in [spills into next entry] the evening

On the website and in *Emilie Davis's Civil War*, the entry is published as:

very Pleasant day no letter from Nellie what can the matter be today we had a grand romp out on the town rachel Jonston came over in the afternoon and ephriam will the res in [spills into next entry] the evening

Careful proofreading catches those mistakes.

What is gained by publishing quite imperfect and wildly divergent editions of these diaries? Indubitably, the publications draw attention to a rich historical source, its companionable author, and the many revelations and insights about nineteenth-century life that she provides. But after all this attention, if a student or scholar or curious person wants to quote from the diary or be certain what Emilie Davis wrote about her days, he or she must still go to the manuscript and read the diaries afresh. The reader cannot have "confidence in the reliability of the printed text" in any of the three works.

The *Memorable Days* website is the oddest of the versions. Its transcription of the diaries memorializes an early phase of the team's work like an abandoned draft of history. A few weeks after the site went public at the start of 2013, a reader used the space for comments to suggest that a word deemed illegible by the team in the entry for January 2, 1863, "seems to be 'reading.'" A year later, another reader remarked of the entry for January 12, 1863, "I think 'Hather' is Father." Not all comments deliver usable suggestions, but in these cases and others, the Memorable Days team agreed and incorporated the new readings into their book while they left the website's transcription unchanged. In other words, Judith Giesberg and her (now) former students know that the website's rendering of the

diary is, in some respects, incorrect and that it is incomplete. Visitors to the site do not know that.

Under ideal circumstances, the *Memorable Days* website would provide readers with the best and most complete rendering of the diaries' text and also offer a model for editing such a difficult text. It already provides readers with images of the diaries—digital photographs of each manuscript page—that can be read from anywhere in the world. Readers can click back and forth between image and the imperfect transcription or use the images to make their own version. Whitehead referred her readers to those images so that her work could be checked, as a kind of backup to her copy-editing of the text.³⁰ If someone still minded the website, its transcription of Emilie Davis's diaries could by now have improved on the published versions. Correcting a digital publication is quick, and the improvement helps readers immediately. Rather than picking random moments when the effort to make sense of Davis's diaries stops, reimagine the site's rough transcript as a work in progress and invite collaborators to keep inching along toward a reliable variant. Reorienting the editor could be more difficult. In the usual course of a scholarly life, when a book is done, the author and the book part company. This kind of web-based collaboration could linger for years, like boomerang children. Furthermore, regardless of the editor's willingness to assume long-term care of an evolving digital publication, any website depends on the goodwill and generosity of its host. It remains to be seen for how long Villanova University will underwrite the *Memorable Days* site, keep it in repair, update software, and manage transitions to new hardware. The three editions of the diaries of Emilie Davis promote the possibility of a turning point in historical publication. The urgency to pronounce one's work at its end and to produce a bound book, no matter how imperfect its contents, here collides with a more fluid and collaborative model of scholarship that would have served Emilie Davis well.

Emilie Davis's story depends entirely on the text she left. Most of the lost or difficult words that matter are evidence about her social identity and private life. Without some degree of confidence that those words are read correctly, Emilie Davis is less herself than a creation of different readers of her text. On September 19, 1864, Emilie Davis seems to be back among her friends in the city after spending the summer as a live-in domestic

³⁰ Whitehead, *Notes from a Colored Girl*, xiii.

in Germantown. Kaye Whitehead read Davis as saying that day, “Lovely morning. I am waiting patiently for my parcel come from Germantown.” The Memorable Days team read: “lovely morning i am waiting Paitenty for my freedom from germontown.” To quibble about spelling “patiently” or whether Emilie inscribed “germon” or “german” is nothing at all, but to learn who is believable when it comes to knowing what Emilie awaited matters. A “parcel” could be clothes or sewing tools or anything else that she took to her summer job. If she awaits “freedom,” the whole story grows more complicated: that is the language of indentured servitude, not wage labor. The writing is so bad on that word, the truth may never be known, but two incorrect answers take readers no closer to knowing Emilie Davis or her world.

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