

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: RECONSTRUCTING MEMORIES: A CASE  
STUDY OF EMILIE DAVIS, A  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY FREEBORN  
COLORED WOMAN

Karsonya Wise Whitehead, Doctor of  
Philosophy, May 2009

Directed By: Christine Mallinson, Assistant Professor,  
Language, Literacy and Culture Program, and Kriste  
Lindenmeyer, Professor and Chair, Department of  
History

This dissertation narratively reconstructs the life of Emlie F. Davis, a nineteenth-century freeborn black American woman living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, through a close reading and analysis of her three antebellum pocket diaries from 1863-1865. Her daily entries are used as a starting point to investigate, explore, and examine Emlie's place within the free black community, her worldviews and her politics, her perceptions of both public and private events, and her personal relationships. As a historical artifact, Emlie's pocket diaries provide a skeleton blueprint of her life that outlines her mobile subjectivity, particularly in relation to the people, incidents, and ideologies that shaped and formed her identity.

Although Emlie's entries are sparse (roughly 20-40 words per day) and thus provide only brief snapshots of her life, her pocket diaries are nevertheless a tool to analyze her worldview in the larger context of nineteenth-century black American life. Through an analytical lens, I am able to situate Emilie in a historical and literary context, adding to the study of nineteenth-century black American women's

experiences by filling a void in scholarly documentation of women who dwell in spaces between those who were considered elite and those who were enslaved.

Drawing upon the scholarly traditions from history, literature, and linguistics, I investigate Emlie's diaries both as a whole and in terms of her specific daily entries. From a historical perspective, the narrative of Emlie's life for these three years is recreated and the free black community in which she lived and worked is analyzed. From a literary perspective, Emlie's diaries are examined as a social, racial and gendered non-fiction text. From a black women's studies perspective, Emlie's agency and identity are examined, grounded in theory from the canonical works of black feminist scholars. And from a linguistics perspective, Emlie's discourse about her interpersonal relationships, her work, and external events in her life reveal how she used language to construct her social, racial and gendered identities. Drawing upon this interdisciplinary analytic framework, I consider Emlie's life as a working-class free black American woman, using her specific racial and social experiences, as recorded in her own words, to provide a richer and more detailed portrait of her life.