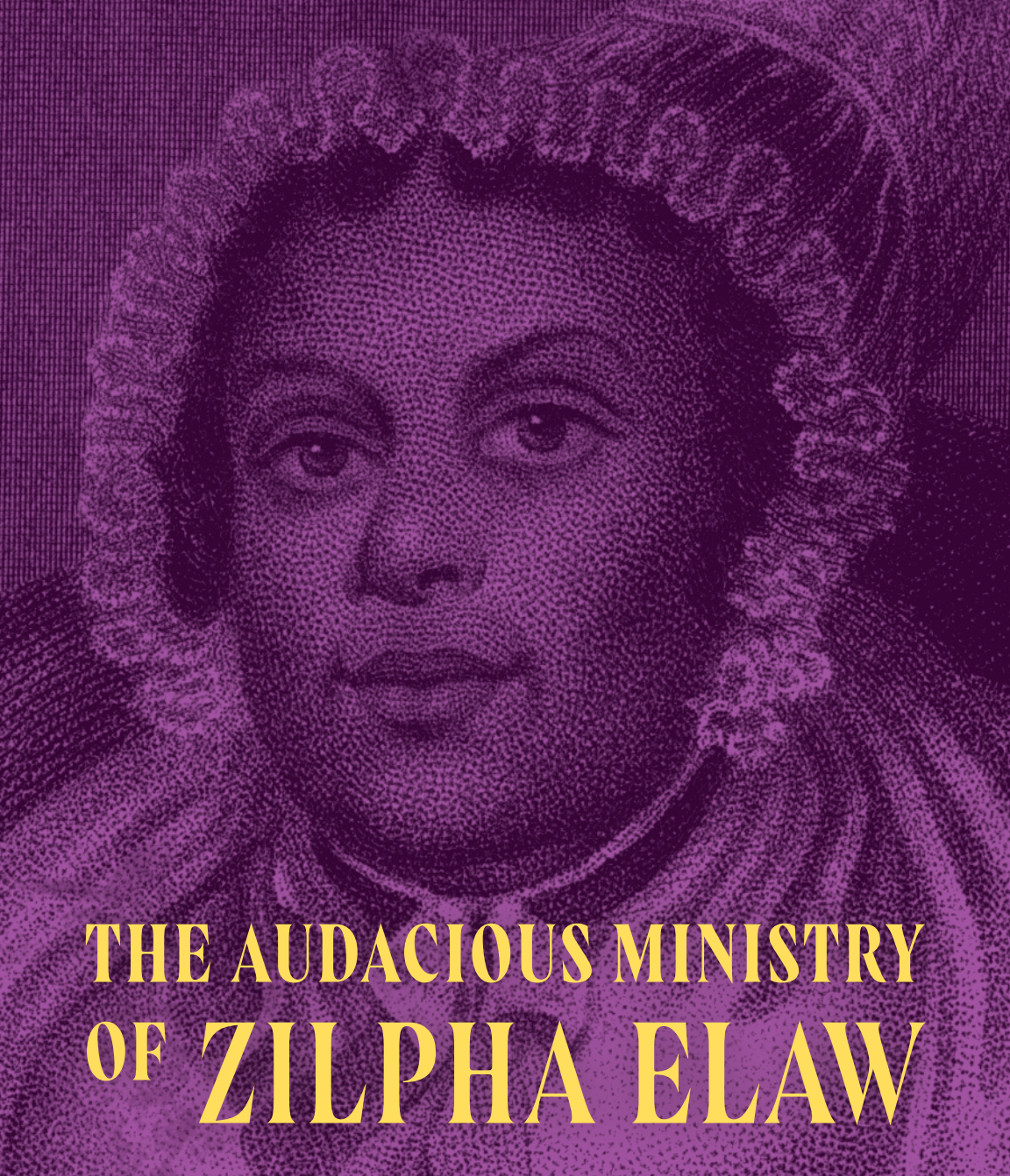




THE AUDACIOUS MINISTRY OF ZILPHA ELAW

RACE, RELIGION, AND REBELLION

Kimberly D. Blockett

The Audacious Ministry of Zilpha Elaw



BUY

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The Audacious Ministry of Zilpha Elaw

Race, Religion, and Rebellion

KIMBERLY D. BLOCKETT

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Prologue

The Surreal Symmetry of Black Religious Life and Racial Violence in America

The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery; under the leadership of the priest and medicine man, afterward of the Christian pastor, the Church preserved in itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the center of Negro social life. So that today the Negro population of the United States is virtually divided into Church congregations, which are the real units of the race life. —W. E. B. DU BOIS, *Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment*

[The church bombing that killed four little girls tells us] that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. —MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., “Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Eulogy”

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FIGURE P.1. Arson of Church of God in Christ, Springfield, Massachusetts, 2008.
Photo: Reuters Pictures.

Zilpha Elaw daily walked the line between divinity and danger as an itinerant preacher in the 1830s. Traveling alone as a Black woman claiming religious authority that no denomination recognized, she was a spectacle to some and an abomination to many others. Elaw was calling herself a preacher and traveling freely from northern to southern states. For the twenty years she preached in the United States, her gender invited ridicule and her race incited rage. Until she moved to England, Elaw's ministry was often derided for taking up space intended only for white men. Moreover, Elaw's story highlights the ever-present suspicion and fear of Black religious practices, from the first slave ships to present. Black religious spaces—whether a clearing in the woods or a megachurch structure—have always been targets for violence.

For example, the burning church seen in figure P.1 was photographed in the predawn hours after the 2008 inauguration of Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, after three white men ran through the woods in Springfield, Massachusetts, to pour gasoline over Macedonia Church of God in Christ.¹ Ignited by rage, the church fire lit up a night that was supposed to be about celebration. A neighbor awakened by the blaze could only bear witness. "It was kind of a surreal thing," he reported. It seemed to him more "like Springfield,

Mississippi,” than Springfield, Massachusetts. Meanwhile, Bishop Bryant Robinson Jr., pastor of the predominately Black church, was quick to note that there was “a symmetry” between the joy following Obama’s win and the devastation of watching years of parishioners’ work and worship burn to the ground (The Republican Newsroom 2008).

The suspicious timing of the fire didn’t take long to make national news, and many African Americans held a collective breath, thinking “and so it begins.” Most expected some form of violent backlash to the presidential election. Few were surprised that it began in a church. Black religion in the United States, in all forms, has been a primary target of racial violence for more than two centuries.² As Black populations grew in the urban areas of the North in the early nineteenth century, so did whites’ anxiety and fear regarding Black economic and social development. Black churches, in particular, were seen as pillars of their growing communities—and targeted because of it. In 1834, for example, white Philadelphians’ race riots destroyed two churches and defaced another over several days of assaults on Black neighborhoods.

Moreover, Black preachers have always been suspect in the minds of racist “Christians” wanting to rid their cities of incendiary speech. The Black sermonic tradition is often perceived and represented as a direct danger to white nationalism. Indeed, from reverends David Walker to William Barber, Old Elizabeth to Renita Weems, Black preachers have stood in the intersections of moral, spiritual, and political movements. And the long arc of resisting oppression remains a central topic in African American pulpits, where the lines between preacher and activist are often blurred.

It is no surprise, then, that Black preachers once again stood on the front lines of facing down white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017—nearly a decade after the church burning in Springfield, Massachusetts, and 183 years since the race riots in Philadelphia. Echoing the community ethos that has brought Black Church leaders to the forefront of civil action and community uplift for the past two centuries, a Black preacher organized the Charlottesville Clergy Collective. The interracial, interfaith group called for clergy and theologians from across the country to gather in the small college town and counterprotest the Unite the Right rally. Together, this group locked arms and marched through the streets holding “Love” signs while chanting “Black Lives Matter” in the faces of angry white supremacists. In turn, they were terrorized by the neo-Nazi groups and feared for their lives.

The tragic and horrific brutality that day legitimized the clergy’s fear and stunned the nation. It was a haunting reminder of our country’s long and violent racial history, a legacy poignantly dramatized when those white supremacists

ORGAN OPENING.—On Sunday, two sermons were preached on the occasion of the opening of a large fine toned powerful organ, in the Primitive Methodist Chapel, Keighley, by the Rev. W. Saunderson, of Halifax; and on Monday evening, according to announcement, Mrs. Elaw, a lady of colour, from America, preached in the same place. As soon as the doors were opened the rush and pressure of the crowd became so tremendous that several were taken out severely crushed, and it was with considerable difficulty the service could be commenced. The services on both occasions were select and appropriate, assisted by the amateurs of the neighbourhood. Mr. Sunderland, of that place, presided at the organ, and displayed the varied capabilities and power of the instrument in a judicious manner. The collections after the different services amounted to nearly £30.

FIGURE P.2. Article describing crowds for “Mrs. Elaw,” *Leeds Mercury*, Saturday, April 17, 1841. Source: British Library.

surrounded a Charlottesville church—a threat that echoed the looting and burning of Black churches throughout US history. But this is not just a legacy of violence. It is also a complex legacy of courage and the multiple forms of activism expressed by Black Church leaders at different times and places.

Almost two hundred years before those clergy journeyed to face the evil in Charlottesville, a Black Methodist minister, Zilpha Elaw, preached during the church burnings of the 1830s, chanced being kidnapped by Northern enslavers, and risked being lynched when she traveled to stand in the faces of Southern enslavers and preach the Gospel of love. In her 1846 *Memoirs*, she gives us a carefully crafted autobiography focused on the thousands of miles she traveled and the multitude of souls she saved. As a Black orphan indentured to a Quaker family in Bristol, Pennsylvania, young Zilpha Panco Elaw (ca. 1793–1873) decided to join the upstart Methodists in 1808.³ She preached her first sermon a decade later, ignoring her husband and the many church leaders, clergy, and laity who tried to silence her. Elaw’s memoir chronicles the first twenty years of her forty-year itinerant ministry during massive Protestant revivalism in the United States and England.

Preaching from Maine to Virginia, Elaw attracted multiracial and multidenominational audiences that included powerful and wealthy men, well-connected white women, working-class and poor families, and enslaved communities. She moved from Pennsylvania to Burlington, New Jersey, then to Nantucket, Massachusetts, and finally, in 1840, to London’s East End. As Elaw preached all over England, she became a celebrity preacher and twice drew crowds so large it

resulted in a human crush with multiple injuries (figure P.2). Researching Elaw's life reveals even more stories and much more complexity than her astonishing publication of transatlantic preaching. This book tells a fuller and more nuanced story of her ministry—one steeped in radicalism.

Putting Elaw's spiritual autobiography in context helps us to understand Black Protestantism in the United States and how it has been consistently, surreally, targeted as a threat to white supremacy. Her life story is one of many nineteenth-century Black travel stories in which the hardships of living in the United States becomes the catalyst for international travel, exile, and expatriation. Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs* details some of her early life and the first twenty years of her ministry.

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BLACK RELIGIOUS LIFE AND RACIAL VIOLENCE xiii

Introduction

The Mighty Movements of Zilpha Panco Elaw Shum

Walk worthy of the high vocation wherewith you are called . . . in this day of feverish restlessness and mighty movement. —ZILPHA ELAW, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour*

The history of Black subjects in the diaspora is a geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements. —KATHERINE MCKITTRICK, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*

In the dedication of her memoirs, Zilpha Elaw cautioned readers to “walk worthy.” Her words were emblematic of her own mighty movements as an itinerant preacher, which transformed the landscape of evangelicalism and perceptions of Black female experience. Elaw’s ministry enabled her to move and cover vast territories. Using the Bible as her shield, Zilpha Elaw navigated the countryside

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of the eastern United States and England, preached to Southern enslavers, chastised rich white men, and ignored the censures of white women. As she traveled, she reproached human traffickers, flouted the rules of domesticity, and narrowly avoided debtor's prison. Courting danger at every turn, Elaw created, in the minds of white Americans and Britons, a spectacle.

Elaw was well known from Maine to Virginia, where she preached from 1820 into the 1840s, and she was famous in most of England from 1840 through the 1860s. In the course of her life's work, not only did Elaw move across state and national borders, but she also regularly trespassed on societal boundaries. Women preachers were not allowed in any US Christian denominations except for a few Quaker sects. And while it was dangerous and scandalous for any woman to travel alone, it was illegal in many states for Black people to travel freely. The notoriety of Elaw's life was not due simply to her choice to preach, therefore, but also to her itinerancy. Her constant movement placed her life in danger. At the same time, it enabled a measure of freedom about which most of her race, class, and gender might only dream. Her travels changed the geographic and cultural environments she traversed as much as they changed the contours of her own life. As a Black woman granting herself biblical authority, this American evangelist represented and challenged a new nation's fear of the poor, the feminine, and the descendants of Africans.

Elaw's intersectional story of preaching and traveling as a free Black woman before US emancipation gives us a better understanding of how three central issues of the nineteenth century—slavery, religion, and women's rights—collided, reshaped, and redefined each other and the larger cultures through which she moved. Fortunately, she left a narrative of her extraordinary life: *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, and Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America, Written by Herself* (1846). Its depth of content and transatlantic scope make this the most expansive of the Black spiritual autobiographies available to us today. Moreover, it offers an extraordinary narrative about the largest religious and cultural movement to sweep two nations, the Second Great Awakening.¹

Yet, not many people in the twenty-first century know of this famous nineteenth-century Black evangelist. In Bristol, Pennsylvania, where she was born and grew up, the local historians and special collections librarians I spoke to during my research had not heard of her. She was equally unknown in the Historical Society and local libraries of Burlington County, New Jersey, where she lived with her husband and daughter, ran a private school for Black children, and began her Methodist ministry.² Even in England, where she was most prominent, Elaw was

rendered invisible in the meeting minutes and journals of the white men who ran and recorded the events of the Methodist ministries for which she preached. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that even those who study gender, race, religion, or literature of the nineteenth century know very little about the full life of Zilpha Elaw. Her memoirs have received sparse attention in literary and religious studies.³ While she is almost always mentioned in studies of early American preaching women, there are few works that provide a substantive focus on Elaw. Ironically, historians of Christianity have published even less work on Elaw. Her narrative has been undervalued, and there has been no sustained attempt to re-create the world and travels of the only known African American woman to document such an extensive period of the Second Great Awakening in the United States and England.

Zilpha Elaw lived a life of rebellion; her calling, her travel, and her writing were all subversive acts protected by her strategic use of biblical rhetoric. Her story provides a model for the ways Black women in nineteenth-century America helped to shape the growing sentiment of social discontent—religious, racial, and gendered. *The Audacious Ministry of Zilpha Elaw: Race, Religion, and Rebellion* uncovers specifics of her preaching career and provides much more information than was previously available about her life, her work, and the world she inhabited. Through archival recovery, this book begins a new conversation about Elaw's ministry—a model that helps us to see how Black, pre-Civil War women used evangelism to further large-scale social reform alongside their own individual desires for freedom of movement.⁴

However, as with all recovery work, the findings necessarily engender more questions. For example, Elaw had an ambiguous relationship with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. What are we to make of this in light of her religious itinerancy? How much did her preaching, without the official support of any church, further expose Elaw to danger as regional attitudes about Black religiosity shifted from ambivalence to violent distrust? What were the circumstances of her second marriage to Ralph Shum, an Englishman of German descent? The archival work detailed here makes possible deeper exploration and more inquiry about the implications of her evangelism for the study of Black women, autobiography, and religion. These and other lingering questions, at present unanswerable, may get resolved as more scholars pick up these threads to weave together a richer, more textured tapestry of women's ministries in the nineteenth century.

Alongside my scholarly edition of Elaw's *Memoirs*, this book is just the beginning of what I hope will be renewed and continuing studies of Elaw among multiple disciplines, particularly religious studies.⁵ For example, Elaw's narrative

is long overdue for a comprehensive, exegetical study of her surgical and strategic use of Christian scripture. While this book reads Elaw's life and travels specifically through a cultural studies—rather than theological—lens, both the analysis and the archival context provide rich material for scholars of gender, religious studies, North American and English Methodism, and African American and Black Atlantic studies.

This exploration of Elaw's movements offers a methodology to examine the politics of location and the relationship between geographic spaces, ideology, and subjectivity. The desire to travel is often an urge to change material circumstances when they deny or run counter to one's attempts at self-definition. To explore the various ways that race, class, and gender complicate that desire, I pay particular attention to geography and how changes in location affect Black women's ability or inability to resist agents of oppression. Studies of travel, displacement, and exile have questioned how to theorize individual and cultural intersectionality in the midst of large-scale social movements. This book answers, in part, that it is often through travel that women writers engage and evaluate their own transitions and transformations. In Elaw's case, travel was central to the Methodist evangelical mission to spread the gospel. Travel was also essential to imperialist missions to explore foreign spaces and enslave foreign bodies. She lived and worked in a constant state of negotiating those two missions that were often intertwined.

In their autobiographies, early Black women writers recorded the creations of Black female subjectivity in the New World. During Elaw's lifetime, the preponderance of travel writing in tandem with the rapid movement of the Second Great Awakening combined to create a rich environment for the narratives of itinerant preaching women. When Elaw self-published her *Memoirs* in London, it was a profoundly insurgent act. Her autobiography rejects the systemic hegemonies that worked to stem the tide of women writers, devalued Black life, and erased Black women from the written records of religious activism.

Memoirs begins with Elaw's introduction to Methodism in southeast Pennsylvania (1808) and ends with her plan to return to the United States after five years in England (1845). The memoir presents a compelling, expatriate view of preaching in antebellum America during two pivotal social movements: the Second Great Awakening and the beginnings of women's rights activism in the United States.⁶ Interesting for its firsthand account of antebellum life and for its intervention against exoticizing and victimizing Black female bodies, Elaw's hybrid spiritual and travel narrative documents the dichotomy between the female majority in the American Protestant church and the restrictions against women advancing in Christian leadership and preaching. Moreover, in terrifying

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REGISTRATION DISTRICT Mile End Old Town

1873 DEATH in the Sub-district of Mile End Old Town Western in the County of Middlesex

Column—	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
274	Twentieth August 1873 33 Turner Shum Street	Zilpha Elaw	Female	80	Widow of Paragon Street 4 Years	Paragon Street 4 Years	Francis Elaw	21st August 1873	John B. Elaw

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 5th day of February 2008

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FIGURE 1.1. Death certificate of Zilpha [Elaw] Shum, August 20, 1873. Source: General Register Office, England.

accounts of dangerous travel alone through the North and South from 1823 to 1840, Zilpha Elaw witnessed massive social changes over tumultuous pre-Civil War decades. Along the way, Elaw's evangelical narrative reinterprets biblical discourse and societal scripts of "proper femininity" to enable her travel throughout the eastern seaboard and eventually to England.

The structure of this spiritual autobiography is framed by Elaw's transatlantic voyage, indicating the journey's central place in her life story. Within this framework, Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs* begins with her call to the ministry in her early twenties, after she is married with a daughter. At first, she responds by engaging in limited travel to Methodist camp meetings, but after the death of her husband in 1823, she leaves her fifteen-year-old daughter with friends so she can take up evangelical travel. She eventually goes abroad to England in 1840. The narrative challenges the racial, patriarchal, and religious boundaries intended to define and confine her both spiritually and physically. Indeed, by 1845, when Elaw was completing her memoirs in London, the US Methodist Church had voted to ban female preaching and refused to publish women's narratives.⁷ After self-publishing her book in 1846, Zilpha Elaw seemed to disappear, leaving little trace of her extraordinary life beyond the pages of her memoir.

My recovery of new biographical information establishes a geographic record on which to map the sociohistorical significance of Elaw's journeys. Zilpha Elaw (née Panco) was born in Bristol Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, a community of mostly white and some free African American families.⁸ Given the scarcity of records documenting the Panco family, it is possible that the elder Pancos may once have been enslaved and later manumitted in the eighteenth century. The 1790 census indicates that Elaw was not yet born, listing only her father, Sanco Panco, with a household of three—presumably himself, his wife, and Elaw's older brother, Joseph.⁹ The 1841 UK census lists her age as forty-five, the 1871 UK census lists her age as seventy-six, and her death certificate lists her birth year circa 1793 (figure 1.1).¹⁰ Therefore, it is likely that her birth year is between 1793 and 1796.

Elaw was one of three children who survived her mother's twenty-two child-births.¹¹ Zilpha, her father, mother, and two siblings, Joseph and Hannah, lived next door to Samuel Panco (most likely Elaw's uncle) and his family of five. Sadly, the siblings were separated when they were still quite young. Joseph went to live with his mother's parents somewhere in the Midwest when he was about twelve. Six years later, when Zilpha herself was twelve years old, her mother died in childbirth. At that point, Hannah went to live with an aunt in Philadelphia, and Zilpha's father, Sanco, placed Elaw in service to Rebecca and Pearson Mitchell.¹² The Mitchells, a white Quaker family of five, were members of the Middletown Monthly Meeting and neighbors of the Pancos.¹³

Elaw describes herself as a mildly rebellious teenager in the Mitchell home; she used God's name in vain (once) and sometimes talked back to her mistress.¹⁴ Moreover, young Zilpha could not reconcile herself with the Quaker religion.¹⁵ She considered their silent meditation a "lack of religious restraint [that] . . . gave way to the evil propensities of an unregenerate heart" (Elaw 2021, 10). To add to her unhappiness, Sanco Panco died before she turned fourteen, leaving her orphaned in complete emotional isolation. While Elaw grieved for her father, her deep depression alarmed Rebecca Mitchell enough to allow her young servant to attend local Methodist meetings. Her introduction to Methodism changed the trajectory of Elaw's life.

One morning, while milking a cow, Elaw had a vision of Christ walking into the stall. Convinced that she was hallucinating, she reports that her vision was confirmed when she saw that

even the beast of the stall gave forth her evidence to the reality of the heavenly appearance; for she turned her head and looked round as I did; and when she saw, she bowed her knees and cowered down upon the ground.

I was overwhelmed with astonishment at the sight, but the thing was certain and beyond all doubt. I write as before God and Christ, and declare, as I shall give an account to my Judge at the great day, that everything I have written in this little book, has been written with conscientious veracity and scrupulous adherence to the truth. . . . From that happy hour, my soul was set at glorious liberty; and, like the Ethiopic eunuch, I went on my way rejoicing in the blooming prospects of a better inheritance with the saints in light. This, my dear reader, was the manner of my soul's conversion to God. (Elaw 2021, 12)

Taking refuge in her newfound faith, Elaw spent her young adulthood developing herself into a model Methodist and redirecting her energies toward Christian salvation. Some months after her conversion, Elaw was admitted into the newly established Bristol Methodist Episcopal Society by James Polemus, listed in the *History of Bristol Borough* as the first “preacher in charge” of the new church (Green 1911, 83).¹⁶

Elaw's strict Methodism evoked constant rebukes from Rebecca Mitchell and cruel torment from her teenage peers. In the absence of specific dates, it appears that she remained in service to the Mitchells until she was approximately eighteen years old or until she married Joseph Elaw in 1810 when she would have been at least nineteen or twenty years old. They lived in Falls Township, just north of Bristol. Elaw reports that although she was always an obedient wife, the marriage was fraught because Joseph was a “very respectable young man, in the general acceptance of the term, but he was not a Christian” (Elaw 2021, 17). She explains:

I am aware that when once the carnal courtship is commenced, the ensnared Christian fondly imagines that he shall soon be able to persuade his unregenerate companion to think as he does, and also to love and serve God with him; and on the other hand, the carnal suitor accounts religion as mere whimsy and pretense, and flatters himself that he shall soon divert the object of his desire from so melancholy and superstitious a pursuit; and thus both of them are miserably deceived, and miss of that happiness they so fallaciously had dreamt of. I am sorry to say, I know something of this by experience. My dear husband had been a member of the society to which I belonged, and had been afterwards disowned by them; but I could not regard him as a backslider from religion, for I am of the opinion that he had never tasted of the pardoning love of God through the atonement of Jesus Christ. He made many promises that he would again unite with the Church, . . . but they were never fulfilled. (17–18)

After the birth of their only child, Rebecca (1812–83), they moved to Burlington, New Jersey, a few miles away on the other side of the Delaware River, where Joseph could pursue his trade as a fuller.¹⁷ In Burlington, the new family enjoyed living in a small community of African Americans concentrated near the Delaware River on Main and Pearl Streets (Lyght 1978, 41–47). During the Elaws' ten-year residency, Burlington County had the largest Black population of the state's five southern counties and the largest free Black population in the state of New Jersey. While there, Elaw was pleased to join a Methodist class meeting, routine small-group sessions that were integral to the structure of Methodism.¹⁸ Her class met just a few doors away from their home, and she also attended the Methodist chapel nearby. Her husband tried in vain to stop her from attending meetings, but Elaw soon ascended to the role of class leader.

During this time, Elaw began to leave her family and travel to weeklong camp meetings, which were popular outdoor revivals. The camp meetings were key drivers of the religious awakenings happening across the country and were generative experiences for Elaw during the entirety of her US ministry. Elaw narrates the significant role that these revivals held in her life and describes the moment she reached a pinnacle of piety—sanctification:¹⁹

Whether I was in the body, or whether I was out of the body, on that auspicious day, I cannot say; but this I do know, that at the conclusion of a most powerful sermon . . . I became so overpowered with the presence of God, that I sank down upon the ground, and laid there for a considerable time; and while I was thus prostrate on the earth, my spirit seemed to ascend up into the clear circle of the sun's disc; . . . I distinctly heard a voice speak unto me, which said, "Now thou art sanctified; and I will show her what thou must do." . . . When I recovered from the trance or ecstasy into which I had fallen, the first thing I observed was, that hundreds of persons were standing around me weeping; and I clearly saw by the light of the Holy Ghost, that my heart and soul were rendered completely spotless clean as a sheet of white paper, and I felt as pure as if I had never sinned in all my life. (Elaw 2021, 22)

In 1817, during another camp meeting, Elaw had a vision that determined her calling to preach. At first, she restricted her preaching. She preached when requested in her community, during visits to congregants confined at home, and, occasionally, at camp meetings. Her local preaching continued until her husband died of consumption in 1823. But after his death, Elaw left her young daughter with friends so that she could take up evangelical travel from Maine to Virginia, including two perilous trips south.

Elaw's memoirs make only cursory mention of her daughter, and always in relation to the progress of Elaw's ministry and travels. Elaw does not provide her name. As it turns out, however, Rebecca Elaw Pierce Crawford's life was integrally intertwined with her mother's. When Elaw took her first trip to Nantucket in 1832, Rebecca had been apprenticed as a dressmaker in New York for two years. Soon after Elaw arrived in Nantucket, she was confined for eight months with a serious illness, and her daughter came to care for her. During the time that Rebecca was tending to her mother, she met Thomas Pierce, a sailor of Nantucket. Rebecca and Thomas married in 1833 and had three sons, Joseph (b. 1834), Thomas (b. 1837), and David (b. 1845). The Pierce home offered a welcome respite for Elaw. She and her daughter, with whom she had not lived for almost eight years, chose Nantucket to make their next home together. Until she left for England in 1840, Elaw lived on Nantucket with her daughter's family.²⁰

Because Thomas Sr. spent a good deal of time at sea, Rebecca and her mother kept busy maintaining a home, and both joined the Methodist Episcopal Society. Nantucket had two churches that served the Black community, the African Baptist Church (est. 1825) and Zion AME (est. 1832). Both welcomed Elaw as a frequent minister in their pulpits, but when it came to her own spiritual edification, Elaw always joined the integrated but predominately white Methodist churches of Bristol, Burlington, and then Nantucket. She felt that the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the "parent stock" church, held closer to her preference for orthodoxy. For the first few years, Elaw spent her time primarily on the island, ministering to its community. By 1835, however, she had resumed her itinerant life and spent most of her time once again traveling between Maine and Virginia, stopping in Nantucket for brief periods of respite and rejuvenation with her family. During her travels, Elaw frequently mentioned her desire to go to London, but her *Memoirs* do not give a specific reason for her aspiration. Perhaps the decline of revivalism and increasing blowback against women preachers in the United States precipitated her favorable views of England, where there were more opportunities for women preachers and for Black people. Even though some of her friends were supportive of her taking a mission trip to England, Elaw was reticent to embark and felt ill-prepared to leave, probably due to financial reasons and her attachment to her growing family.

Finally, on July 1, 1840, after seventeen years of itinerant preaching, Elaw booked passage on the ship *Philadelphia* and sailed from New York to London. Shortly after she arrived, Elaw began preaching regularly for the Primitive Methodist Hull Circuit under the supervision of John Coulson, the superintendent minister in Pontefract, West Yorkshire. Elaw's *Memoirs* and many local


 CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE
 GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE
 Application Number COL966319

1852. Marriage solemnized at Here in the Parish of S. Mary, Bradford Row in the County of Wiltshire

No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the Time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Residence.	Rank or Profession of Father.
446	December 9	Ralph Bressey Shum	24	Widower	Gentleman	Here	John Bressey Shum	Pork-butcher
		Zilpha Elaw	24	Widow	—	Here	Charles Parrott	Butcher

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, by James Harris or after J. S. B. Field by me,

This Marriage was solemnized between us, Ralph Bressey Shum Zilpha Elaw James Harris Henry Bann Bull

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a register of Marriages in the Registration District of Poplar
 Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 23rd day of February 2007

MXD 087437

This certificate is issued in pursuance of section 65 of the Marriage Act 1949. Sub-section 3 of that section provides that any certified copy of an entry purporting to be sealed or stamped with the seal of the General Register Office shall be received as evidence of the marriage to which it relates without any further or other proof of the entry, and no certified copy purporting to have been given in the said Office shall be of any force or effect unless it is sealed or stamped as aforesaid.

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04/2010 11053 04/06 10/01 01/05/06


 G.W.

FIGURE 1.2. Marriage certificate of Ralph Bressey Shum and Zilpha Elaw, December 9, 1850. Source: General Register Office, England.

newspapers report the popularity of her preaching in the Yorkshire and Northumberland regions (both part of the Hull Circuit). Then, after five years abroad, Elaw wrote and self-published her autobiography (1846), which included a dedication to her English friends.

In her dedication, Elaw writes that she is leaving soon to return to the United States. It is possible that her return home was timed to see David, her new grandchild, born in 1845, but she writes only that her five-year mission has ended and she is leaving her book as a farewell to England. This is the point at which all knowledge of Elaw's life stops. Based on her book published in 1846, it appears that she left England without any record of what happened to her after that.

However, my research indicates that it is unlikely that she left England at all.²¹ She was still preaching in Yorkshire in 1847, and in December 1850 she married recently widowed Ralph Bressey Shum, a white Englishman of German descent (figure 1.2).²² Shum, a retired pork butcher with two adult children, was a devout Methodist, along with his core and extended family, who were prominent figures in the Methodist communities of Greater London, Surrey, and Kent Counties.



FIGURE 1.3. Zilpha Elaw Shum's house at 33 Turner Street, Stepney Fields, London. Photo: Kimberly D. Blockett.

The Elaw-Shum marriage did not last long, however, as Shum died at fifty-nine in September 1854. In his will, Shum left his wife an immediate payout of £25, equivalent to a modern sum of approximately £2,500, and half of the remains of his household. The other half he bequeathed to his daughter, Elizabeth, and he set up a ten-shilling allowance for his son, Thomas. The rest of his estate income was to go to his widow as a weekly allowance.

It's not clear how much preaching, if any, Elaw did during her marriage, but by 1855 she was busy on the circuit and drawing large crowds. She continued to preach in rural England and in London, mostly for the Primitive Methodists and sometimes for Wesleyans, but her ministry did not exclude any protestant denomination.²³ Regional and national newspapers confirm that, throughout her career, Elaw filled large halls to such capacity that people were denied admission. The last known account of her preaching was in 1864. Toward the end of her life, Elaw suffered from partial paralysis and dementia.²⁴ She was still living in London with a servant/caregiver when she died in 1873, at approximately eighty years old (figure I.3).²⁵

Going beyond the text and filling in the gaps between 1845 (the ending of Elaw's autobiography) and her 1873 death gives us a better understanding of Elaw and the geographic spaces she traversed. Providing the social and cultural context makes clear how her narrative functions as an examination of gender and race politics in Methodist cultures of the United States and England.²⁶ After fifteen years of preaching in the United States, Elaw preached throughout England for at least another twenty-five years. Yet even though her narrative was published in England, where she spent the majority of her adult life, the geography of her ministry has been largely overlooked or diminished; *Memoirs* has been misplaced as a US narrative most often read in tandem with Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, or Rebecca Cox Jackson—women who experienced their conversions and calls to preach as members of Black American churches.²⁷ The focus on the similarities among these texts, primarily these authors' race and gender, has served to limit considerations of Elaw's work in England and her text as a cultural product of that travel. Indeed, knowing the full trajectory of Elaw's development as a preaching woman offers us a more specific understanding of women travelers, Black expatriates, and religious literary history. Written in London primarily for English readers, Elaw's *Memoirs*—when fleshed out and historically situated—is a Black Atlantic spiritual autobiography in the tradition of John Marrant and Boston King.²⁸

Elaw's autobiography raises several questions about the interactions between the interior psyche, the external environment, and the faith-based principles of nineteenth-century preaching women.²⁹ In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine—philosopher, rhetoric professor, world traveler, and the first Western autobiographer—theorizes that travel is ambition. Does Elaw's "feverish restlessness and mighty movement" represent ambition on her part? If so, what kind of ambition: secular or spiritual, gendered or racial? If Elaw's spiritual quest contains a half-hidden secular desire, is it for individualistic aspiration, or does she harbor ambitions with broader, political concerns? Layering historical and personal context onto her writing makes clear that itinerant preaching provided a way to reconceptualize her own life and her constantly changing, antebellum surroundings. Elaw's autobiography is part of a Black Atlantic legacy that Judith Madera explores in *Black Atlas*: "From its putative beginnings, black literature maps the cognitive landscapes of exclusion, stories from the fringes. It also navigates different sites of . . . invisibility that would not have otherwise gained representation, and it holds these to the light" (2015, 55). Although *Memoirs* highlights the exceptionalism of Elaw, it also performs the important function of contextualizing the everyday dangers of being poor, Black, and female during

the early nineteenth century. Her autobiography narrates an “inside while outside” perspective of a principal period in US religious history and illustrates the interconnectedness between Methodist evangelicalism, women’s leadership, and Black mobility.

Recovering Elaw

Any attempt to understand American religious history, the Black church, or American women’s history without an adequate grasp of the groundbreaking work of these Black preaching women will be incomplete. —BETTYE COLLIER-THOMAS, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850–1979*

The intersection of Christianity, race, and patriarchy in the United States is laid bare in the literature of Black women who uniquely and intimately knew both their own worlds and the worlds of those with power over them: white Americans and Black men. Through the life and writings of Elaw, a Black woman preacher, we can stand at the busy interchange of race, class, and gender, and study the social traffic of US Protestant culture before the Civil War. *The Audacious Ministry of Zilpha Elaw* does three things: It showcases *Memoirs* as a story of the relationships between Black Protestantism, women preachers, and the Second Great Awakening; it answers the call to reconstruct the real life of a Black preaching woman; and it brings that life to bear on these defining events of nineteenth-century American culture.³⁰

The gaps in the scholarship on Black women preachers, in particular, are a critical dearth in religious and American studies. These omissions obscure important class distinctions that get to the heart of the vast differences of what being American meant for different groups of “free” citizens. In 1827, Zilpha Elaw (2021) asked, “How can I be a mouth for God!—a poor, coloured female: and thou knowest we have many things to endure which others do not” (42). She was at once acknowledging her slave-classed position in the US hierarchies of race, class, and gender, and also claiming authority to speak—indeed, to preach—from within her unique situation.

Here, I use the term *slave-classed* to indicate the antebellum context of her life, even though she was not enslaved.³¹ In his “Address to the Colored People of the United States,” Frederick Douglass explains that “in the Northern states, we are not slaves to individuals, not personal slaves, yet in many respects we are the slaves of the community” (Bell 1969, 18). In 1846, when Elaw published her narrative, she was still poor; she was still slave-classed; and, twenty years into her itinerant ministry, she was still fighting for her right to preach because women

were being forced out of leadership roles in almost every Christian denomination. Research on the preaching, narrative, and life of Zilpha Elaw allows us to entertain several notions about the overlapping boundaries and burdens of race, class, and gender in early US Christian culture. The interconnectedness of being Black, being poor, and being female marginalized preachers like Elaw—not only during their antebellum lives but also, later, in the archives of American religion.³²

Bridging some of the biographical gaps reinforces the theoretical relevance of archival knowledge. Literary historian Eric Gardner (2009a) cautions that scholars should “never, never sever theory from the archive; the archive is our source of theory, should make our theory and our practice. Let *it* tell us about its own organizational frameworks, logics, questions, conflicts, and content.” Since the constructions of historical narratives are scholarly acts of piecing together a puzzle, using the larger context of the puzzle to place one piece before obtaining all its adjacent pieces is a useful, often necessary, way to complete the puzzle.

Recovery work and nuanced readings of Elaw’s narrative challenge narrow methods of interpretation when the record is woefully incomplete, as is the case with so many Black women’s lives. In “Subject to Speculation: Assessing the Lives of African-American Women in the Nineteenth Century,” Carla L. Peterson (1998) challenges narrow methods of interpreting a historical record. She suggests that “responsible speculation” using known context is a politically necessary intervention in Black women’s studies. Peterson argues for “maintaining an approach that encourages speculation and resists closure . . . [and] points to the ways in which nineteenth-century African-American women ‘doers of the word’ were neither totally accommodationist nor totally subversive, but repeatedly negotiated agency and oppression, institutions and liminality, and subversion and legitimation” (116). In this case, searching the archives for female Methodist preachers allows us to ground our theories about antebellum Black womanhood in directions that are more expansive and multidimensional than our canonical texts might otherwise suggest.

Until now, what little we knew about Elaw had to be gleaned from her spiritual narrative, which, in keeping with the genre, revealed only enough details of her personal life as was necessary to tell a story of salvation, sanctification, and saving souls. Lacking any evidence of her preaching or writing after the publication of her autobiography, scholarship on Elaw’s provocative life story of perpetual movement and self-exile was limited to *Memoirs* and presumed her retirement after five years in England or perhaps her death during her planned journey back to the United States.³³ However, my archival recoveries from repositories in the eastern United States and England reveal that Elaw’s life was long and much

more extraordinary than her narrative conveys. She neither retired nor died during the 1840s. In fact, while women preachers faced increasing restrictions on preaching and publishing in the United States, Elaw was establishing a highly successful itinerant ministry in England, where she had settled and remarried.

Elaw's autobiography calls for different, more specific studies of Methodism in North America, of the women's movement within the Second Great Awakening, and of the development of independent Black churches. These three movements helped define the multiple meanings of nationhood for the United States as the country negotiated social tensions that began before the Revolutionary War and slowly moved the country toward the Civil War. It was not by accident that two oppressed groups in nineteenth-century American culture, women and descendants of Africa, were a significant percentage of the fastest-growing, most influential Protestant denomination: Methodism. Although it began as a movement within the Anglican Church of England, Methodism eventually separated from the church and established strongholds in much of England—so much so that, in 1833, one vicar complained, “We have lost the people . . . the religion of the mass[es] is become Wesleyan Methodism.” Another vicar complained about working in a country “wholly given up to dissent and perversity [with] Methodism in every house” (qtd. in Westerkamp 1999, 48–49). Meanwhile, Francis Asbury, Wesley's appointee to the American colonies, developed a Methodist following in the northern colonies, and the popular theology survived the Revolutionary War to become part of the fabric of the new United States. Between 1800 and 1830, the Methodist denomination in the United States grew from 65,000 to more than 500,000 members. By mid-century, the denomination's one million-plus membership constituted the largest evangelical network in the country (Westerkamp 1999, 111).

In general, the egalitarian tendency of evangelicalism to “level all men before God” intrigued many Blacks, who were quite active in the movement by the nineteenth century. But it frightened many whites, who viewed evangelists as agitators and disrupters of social hierarchies (Fulop and Raboteau 1997, 93). The Methodists declared that salvation is achievable by all and that to love God and neighbor is the highest commandment. Wesley summed up the basic tenets in three phrases: Do no harm; do good; and attend to the ordinances of God. This generally democratic view of salvation appealed to oppressed peoples. Perhaps most importantly, John Wesley was vehemently opposed to all forms of enslavement and published his views in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, a 1778 pamphlet that was reprinted in Philadelphia. In it, Wesley asks, “Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils, on those who have done us no wrong? Of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? Of tearing them

from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself?" He concludes the passage with his unambiguous stance: "I strike at the root of this complicated villainy. I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice" (34–35).

When Wesley sent his emissaries to the United States, Wesleyan Methodism was a decidedly antislavery society. Abolition was baked into its infrastructure in ways that ultimately split the US church into North and South denominations. Although the antislavery rhetoric of early American Methodism waned as it developed from a radical sect to a mainstream denomination, Black Americans still demanded that the promise of egalitarian practice be fulfilled.

Similarly to its antislavery sentiments, Wesleyan evangelicalism proved to be more inclusive for women, although this also changed over time, particularly in the United States. Some women were able to get support from their individual church ministers to exhort and evangelize—first in their communities, and, if successful, venturing out as lay preachers or itinerants.³⁴ Elaw, for example, began as a class leader and was then appointed to do the home visits to lead prayer at the bedsides of the sick. Such work assigned to women by their male ministers paralleled the explosive growth of many religious societies into full-fledged denominations. The proliferation of women preachers aligned with church membership in the United States becoming majority female, the declining number of male preachers, and the popularization of camp meetings (Brekus 1998, 137).

Although John Wesley allowed some spaces for women to engage in theological practice and teaching within the church, the official stance of the denomination (and almost all other denominations) upheld the admonishment from the apostle Paul that "it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (I Corinthians 14:35).³⁵ Except for the Quakers, no denomination ordained women. Even John Wesley's approval of women acting as class leaders and lay preachers "was always tentative and conditional, never uncomplicated or wholehearted" (Westerkamp 1999, 115). Wesley died in 1791, and in 1803, Wesleyans banned women preachers. During his work in the newly formed United States, Francis Asbury was vocal about his own objections to women's leadership.

Accordingly, much of the leeway granted for women to be exhorters and lay preachers and to perform in other nonordained leadership roles in the eighteenth century had been summarily revoked by the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1830s, Methodists (and later other denominations) began to disavow their earlier reliance on women preachers while erasing them from their written histories (Brekus 1998, 271). After that point, women such as Elaw, who were determined to act as lay preachers, did so at their own behest and with little to no encouragement from their own ministers and congregations. This retrenchment

was not restricted to Methodists: “Baptists, who fifty years before had offered opportunities for female authority and influence, were themselves retracting their promises . . . [and] women had lost most of their congregational authority. Most Baptist men now judged that women had no authority to preach, teach, or pray aloud” (Westerkamp 1999, 116–17).

The paradox, of course, is that Protestant congregations were predominately female, and the foundational nature of Methodist evangelicalism, in particular, was nonhierarchical to the point of radicalism. As abolitionist Lydia Maria Child so aptly pointed out, the evangelicals were the “first agitators of the woman question” (Bass 1979, 280). From the late eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century, the larger social movement of women asserting themselves as thinkers and leaders was nowhere more present than in the churches that they—in deeds if not in record—established, supported, and managed.

During the same period, the egalitarian rhetoric that encouraged women to push for leadership positions had also inspired Black congregations to insist on separate, independent churches for themselves. Although many Northern churches were *technically* integrated because they allowed Black members, all aspects of services and basic accommodations were segregated, including separate seating and communion. Many churches had entirely separate services for Black members. Ironically, the laws passed in the Southern states forbidding religious meetings for enslaved Africans forced “Christian” enslavers to share their chapels with their captives. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the situation had become untenable for all parties.

One Sunday morning in 1787, two Black members of St. George’s Methodist Church of Philadelphia rejected the congregation’s racism, and their actions became a defining moment for Black Christianity and Black nationalism. At St. George’s, the Black members had spent years protesting the restrictions and boundaries within their worship community. They had had enough when two formerly enslaved church leaders, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, were told that they could not pray at the pulpit reserved for whites. Undeterred, they continued with their prayers until they were forcibly pulled up from their knees. Allen, Jones, and all the Black parishioners left their church that day and immediately began their own worship space. Eventually, they founded two churches.

Up and down the eastern US seaboard, more and more Black congregations decided to be free of Jim Crow sabbaths.³⁶ From the 1770s through the 1890s, independent Black churches of all denominations proliferated from New York to the Carolinas and slowly developed in the Midwest and Deep South.³⁷ Black communities in the United States were primarily Protestant, and, according to Martin Delaney, the church was “the alpha and omega of all things” for the

surging free Black populations in the North (Quarles 1969, 69).³⁸ As more and more Black congregations began to form their own churches, separate and distinct from the “integrated” churches, these institutions became much more than just houses of worship. Across denominational lines, the fast-growing churches served as the cultural and, significantly, the political centers of the Black populace, North and South.

Not surprisingly, such growth and independence did not go unnoticed. The physical building of churches became indicators of something much more intangible, but dangerous nonetheless: These new constructions built by Black labor with Black funding became symbols of Black “arrogance” for the larger community (Lapsansky 1980, 63). They were concrete manifestations of socioeconomic growth—progress that would precipitate the social dangers that W. E. B. Du Bois foreboded. In his discussion of nineteenth-century Black Christianity, Du Bois defines “Black church” as not so much an activity or a place but rather a movement (1903). Du Bois theorizes that the act of regulating worship indicates a “suspicion and fear” of it, noting that as early as 1715, North Carolina passed an act forbidding religious gatherings for enslaved people. Of course, there were no physical churches yet, but the meetings themselves, the act of “holding church,” became a threat to the social order. The rebellions planned by two preachers, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, bear this out.³⁹ By the 1830s, the insurrections in the South led to more legislative acts forbidding Black worship, and the threat of social equity in the North led to lynching and riotous church burnings. It is exactly during this contentious period (1830–40) that Zilpha Elaw was traveling extensively from Maine to Virginia.

Dangerous Moves

Elaw preached when women’s labors in the church had been encouraged out of necessity and then denounced, as the fruition of their work cemented the predominance of the denominations they built. Moreover, she preached to men and women together and, in the United States, to racially diverse audiences who were sometimes in the same space but always segregated. Given the social upheavals for all groups involved, every sermon, prayer meeting, gathering, or individual encounter was overdetermined by the complex battles among race, gender, and class. As literary scholar Frances Smith Foster puts it, “The irony is that during the period when abolition and woman’s rights were the most striking topics of public discourse and when woman’s literature emerged as a discrete genre, the voices of those who embodied the merger of both were the least heard” (1993, 79). The narrative Elaw produced, intended as a farewell gift to her

English friends, exemplifies how a few extraordinary nineteenth-century Black women manipulated systems of containment and gained freedom of movement.

This book examines the social themes of Elaw's life as they relate to her environmental context. Specifically, I am interested in her life as a traveler. How did the places from which she came and to which she traveled inform her life, and how did her life inform the culture of those places? Drawing from scholarship in travel studies and cultural geography, my recovery of Elaw's early life in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and her eventual emigration to England highlights her distinctiveness among early Black women evangelists. This exploration of Black female subjectivity through journey responds to cultural historian and anthropologist James Clifford's (1997) call for more research on the reciprocal production of knowledge when marginalized populations travel. Studies of relocations are useful for conceptualizing the relationship between journey and the societies through which Elaw travels. My discussion of four regions of Elaw's movements analyzes the significance of each location within the larger, social narrative and the specific political implications for Elaw's life and ministry.

Although I begin with her preaching in the United States and end with her decision to settle in England, the book is organized thematically, not chronologically. I track her movements to parse out the social themes that motivate, organize, and complicate her journey from the United States to England—from a country enslaved by slavery to a country embracing its abolition. By foregrounding the historical context of both Elaw's life and the places through which she traveled and sometimes settled, I examine some central themes of transatlantic Protestantism and journey through the lens of Elaw's race, class, and gender. Elaw's *Memoirs* clearly illuminates social and economic realities, enabling us to analyze how those dynamics might have differently affected the lives of preaching women. So, instead of telling Elaw's story in the sequential way one would expect from a biography (which this is not), I am telling the story of what it meant to be a Black woman traveler during the nineteenth century and what it meant for the communities Elaw engaged.

The book chapters progress through the layers of Elaw's marginality. In the first two chapters, *Memoirs* is an access point for exploring the intersections of the Second Great Awakening, the women's movement, and racial activism. Elaw's conversion and ministry tracks the same period in which Methodism grew from a peripheral, much-ridiculed sect into a mainstream megadenomination. This is crucial context for understanding Elaw's historical importance and the relevance of her experiences today.

I begin with a general overview of the Second Great Awakening from the vantage point of Elaw's journey from Bristol, Pennsylvania, to London, England, in

the first chapter, “‘You Must Not Kneel Here!’: The Long Arc of Black Churches in the Nineteenth Century.” This chapter analyzes the religious and racial tensions of 1820–40 through the lens of Elaw’s peripheral engagement with the AME Church, as well as her encounters with institutionalized racism in churches in the United States and abroad as a member of the MEC. This summary of early Methodism and the Second Great Awakening situates the advent of independent Black churches and the ensuing violent responses. Building on Martin Delaney’s and Du Bois’s observations about the centrality of the Black Church movement, the chapter illustrates that organized religion, especially Christianity, was a primary form of social resistance for free and enslaved Blacks in the United States. Attracted to the same revolutionary rhetoric used by their white predecessors to reject England’s tyranny, African descendants also borrowed the liberatory language of the King James Bible to stake their claims, not only for abolition but also for social equality. They looked to their spiritual communities as the principal sites of local and institutional activism. The national irony was that the fight for racial equality happened at the behest of, but also in spite of, the church. Early Methodism, in particular, held core principles so radically egalitarian that they presented moral challenges for the Methodists themselves and caused divisive regional and racial splits. The beginning of the Black Church movement was a principal backdrop for Elaw’s travels, especially as she preached in the southern United States. And Elaw’s narrative, more than any other Black spiritual autobiography, provides an intimate portrait of how these larger religious and social conflicts confined the daily lives of Black people while simultaneously creating opportunities for rebellion and self-invention.

Because Elaw preached long before any women were ordained in the MEC, gender is one important category through which to read her narrative and understand her life. Chapter 2, “Flipping the Script(ure) to Navigate Gender and Genre,” details Elaw’s reclamation of personal authority through church leadership and eventual escape from domesticity. It also provides some comparative analysis with the spiritual narratives of Jarena Lee and Nancy Towle. This chapter uses an intersectional approach, as it is difficult—sometimes impossible—to extricate race and class in any examination of the motivations and implications of a Black woman’s experiences and movements. In much the same way that Black Christians, free and enslaved, used scripture to articulate and act on their oppression, Christian women looked to their biblical models for how to create leadership roles for themselves within and beyond the realms that delimited their life choices. For women who were not enslaved, antebellum culture nevertheless confined and constrained their creativity and freedom of movement. Yet, in the churches, women managed the lion’s share of the business and activities

necessary to build, develop, and maintain both the physical and the spiritual structures. Their efficacy in building the spiritual centers of the country encouraged women to organize, strategize, and, sometimes, weaponize their numerical strength.

There is no doubt that, for many women, the patriarchal nature of their worship communities served as yet another layer of oppression; however, some were emboldened by the authority they claimed as class leaders, church mothers, and exhorters. For those few who became itinerant preachers, particularly women of color, lack of social status and money created barriers for travel, access, and publishing. Elaw and a handful of other Black women managed to negotiate these obstacles, but we can assume there are many others about whom we know nothing because their regional scope was too limited, because they may have been illiterate and without access to someone who could write down their experiences, or because they never raised enough money to continue preaching or to publish anything. Being poor also meant fewer alternatives for transportation and lodging, which heightened the physical risks of travel.

Chapter 3, “‘A Mere Creature of Circumstance’: The Economics of Elaw’s Evangelism,” explores the many ways that poverty and social class affected Elaw differently than white women preachers and male traveling preachers (of any race). Her social status varied greatly depending on the cultural and geographic locations in which she found herself. Thus, as she ventured from place to place, pulpit to pulpit, home to home, the precarity of being poor had shifting significance. Every interaction, every preaching appointment, and every engagement of travel and lodging were power negotiations—sometimes subtle and sometimes not.

Throughout her evangelical career, the overlay of economics onto racism created a tangled weave of social instability and gender vulnerability. Elaw highlights what might otherwise be hidden: the secular hardships of spiritual work. It is not left to subtext but rather clearly pronounced in the title of her autobiography: “The Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours” announces her daily grind as a distinctly separate theme of her itinerant ministry. And that grind included hauling her self-published books from pillar to post hoping to sell them.

For Elaw, the intersectional nature of her life—the multiple levels of marginalization she navigated—necessitated both spiritual and travel narrative, a hybrid genre to write her *Memoirs*. I extend this analysis to the following three chapters, in which I argue for a shift in the way we study Elaw’s *Memoirs* and all female narratives of movement. In these chapters, I interrogate the politics of location for an antebellum Black woman traveler and interpret Elaw’s life writing in the

context of her emigration and of Black print culture. I also situate Elaw's erasure from mainstream Methodist history within the long history of obscuring women, particularly women of color, and question the physical consequences of doing so. What are the dangers to Black women's bodies when their lives have been inconsequential in the written histories of human experience?

"The Traveling Subjectivities of a Black Woman Preacher" (chapter 4) builds on the new historical data introduced in the previous chapters and turns to exploring *Memoirs* as a hybrid travel narrative. It defines what I term *locational identity* as the ways in which a geographic place can determine how a person must exist in that space and how that person might resist its form of spatial encoding. Using travel theory and cultural geography as a framework, the chapter theorizes that in every location people negotiate a variety of structures (such as the church, domesticity, poverty, and racial codification) established to define and contain their internal and external perceptions of being. The person then redetermines a strategic existence for that particular location. Elaw's itinerant career exemplifies my argument that the cultural geography of any given location simultaneously closes doors and creates windows of opportunity. In each location, and at every juncture of her life and travels, the specific and sometimes extraordinary conditions of her locational self are negotiated. The chapter inserts Black women into the culture of travel writing in nineteenth-century America; it presents important interventions of travel theory and demonstrates the challenges of travel for women of color; and it theorizes those textual moments when Elaw negotiates an identity for herself as a person who is supposed to be in perpetual motion versus stasis, which she equates with literal death.

Chapter 5, "'Who I Was and from Whence I Came': The Meanings of Home for a Black Woman Traveler," employs my theory of locational identity to argue that the environments of Bristol, Pennsylvania, followed by Burlington, New Jersey, informed Elaw's later choices of home. When a subject self-identifies as a traveler, it is important to pay close attention to those moments and places in which a traveler *settles*. These choices are always the result of a process (movement, adjustments, analysis, and comparison). Given that a traveler spends most of her time in motion, the decision to commit to a specific time and place of stasis (contemplation, relaxation, rejuvenation, community) is necessarily informed and influenced by previous decisions to keep moving. In other words, where a traveler has been will determine where she can and will stay. In this chapter, I follow Elaw's movements from her first two unchosen homes to her chosen homesteads in Nantucket, Massachusetts, and London, England. Previously unknown information about Elaw's hometowns and life reveals how the liminal space of an island, Nantucket, constituted a rejection of where she had been in

the United States (traveling through slavery states and facing Northern racism), as well as a projection of where she wanted to go (across the ocean). Once in England, Elaw's choice to live in London rejected the more provincial counties where she preached most often. She chose to make a home in a cosmopolitan, heavily Methodist section of London with a large multiracial community.

In chapter 6, "The 'Cotton Souls' Disrupting the British Narrative of American Slavery," I position Elaw's text as a countercultural, Black Atlantic narrative. Focusing on the career of Zilpha Elaw after her second marriage to Ralph Bressey Shum, the chapter theorizes the cultural work performed by her ministry and narrative. Specifically, in the print-mediated ethos of Great Britain, Elaw was exoticized as a product of slave culture in representations of her preaching and by the daily editorials, news items, and public opinions expressed about enslaved Blacks in the United States. In effect, the British press created its own version of American Blackness to satisfy their own nationalistic desires to be acknowledged as Christian abolitionists, a moral compass for the world. Their conflation of bondage and African ethnicity was a constant racist backdrop for Elaw's ministry. As such, Zilpha Elaw's evangelical autobiography performed significant cultural work for a British audience conditioned by a print culture that had no narratives for free, educated African American women travelers.

I conclude this book by arguing that our current mappings of Black lives are often too narrow and, thus, encourage a dangerous conflation of abolitionism, slave culture, and Black culture. Such conflation enables large spaces, gaps, and loopholes through which humanity is diminished or lost. I question how archival erasure, past and present, enacts violence on not just the record of a life but on our daily lives. By paying closer attention to alternative genealogies such as Elaw's, my methodology marks out new territory for literary history, print culture, and religious studies, and advances the ongoing, field-shifting work of recovering Black intellectual work that originates from and responds to concerns beyond slave culture. Elaw's *Memoirs* exemplifies how locations—both geographic and cultural—construct, mediate, and (re)shape Black identity. In this way, her narrative articulates how some Black literary traditions existed in tandem with, yet outside of, antislavery projects.

As a Black, female, self-authorized itinerant preacher, Elaw created personal and professional spaces through which she could leave her adolescent daughter, enter the male domain of Methodist ministry, travel alone from Maine to Virginia to England, self-publish her spiritual autobiography in 1846, and maintain a popular ministry in England at least into the 1860s.⁴⁰ She spent her entire adult life doing the unexpected and challenging the unacceptable. Given the long history of women's emotional and spiritual experiences being categorized as

psychosis—often a convenient method for restricting “rebellious” behavior—her actions could easily have been perceived as madness. Some might have said that it was madness to believe that enslavers would heed her warnings that human bondage is a sin, to believe herself safe from the Fugitive Slave Act, or to believe that a Black woman could travel from Virginia to Maine to England without money and by depending on the kindness of strangers. Indeed, she may have been thought mad to leave her only child for months, sometimes years at a time. Elaw’s explanation for her actions was simple: She was called to serve her God.

Many women were called to preach and ignored admonitions to desist. But Elaw stands out in an exceptional group of women who responded to this call in extraordinary ways. How do we explain Elaw’s unique response? Reading her memoirs with new context, let’s imagine that she *was* mad. Mad about being orphaned soon after her mother died giving birth for the twenty-second time. Mad about being separated from the only two siblings who survived her mother’s dangerous labors. Mad about being indentured to the Quaker family living down the street from her family home. Perhaps she was mad that her call to preach was discouraged and disallowed first by her own husband and then by church fathers, just as Richard Allen had initially denied Jarena Lee, the first woman preacher in the AME.⁴¹ Through her writing, we see how Elaw might have managed and channeled such resentments.

Throughout her memoirs, Zilpha Panco Elaw Shum chronicles much more than her own life and ministry. With a clear-eyed vision and unequivocal voice, Elaw writes the chaotic nature of being a Black woman at the intersections of religion, race, class, and gender politics across two nations. When Elaw was faced with her husband’s objections to her preaching and replied that she could not “descend down to the counsel of flesh and blood,” she charmed her readers with humor while narrating the collision of gender roles and spiritual desire. Years later, when she described British antislavery activists as an “august assembly” with dignity “so redundant, that they scarcely knew what to do with it all,” Elaw wrote as a Black immigrant commanding the professional respect that she was being denied (Elaw 2021, 87). In both instances, private and public, her responses signify the intersectional challenges of carefully crafting her persona in every space through which she moved.

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Notes

PROLOGUE. THE SURREAL SYMMETRY OF BLACK RELIGIOUS LIFE AND RACIAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

1. The day before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” sermon at the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) national headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. In 2008, COGIC was one of the largest predominately African American denominations.

2. Although their numbers were much smaller, Black Catholics and Muslims were in the United States long before most of the Protestant sects and faced the same scrutiny and violence. This book focuses on Protestantism, particularly Methodism. For more on the US history of Black Catholics and Muslims, see Austin (1997), Davis (1986), and Sharps (1994).

3. John Wesley, founder of Wesleyan Methodism along with his brother Charles, placed scripture at the core but also stressed that spiritual experience was an equally legitimate source of doctrine. Methodism, which began as an established movement within the Anglican Church, eventually separated from the church, and Wesley’s movement became its own church. Rejecting the Calvinist ideas of predestined and limited access to Christian salvation, Wesley embraced an Arminian theology that God’s grace was available to anyone who chose it. As Wesley intended it, Methodism focuses on an individual’s free will to overcome the original and inherent depravity of humans. Methodism is about method—how does one reach salvation and, ideally, Christian perfection? Wesley provided specific rules and maps for moving through life as a Methodist, and the structure privileges spiritual journey as its doctrine and its polity. The Methodist Societies, or the Connexion, as Wesley termed it, were faith communities of people willing to live every day as a quest for Christian perfectionism known as sanctification. The Methodist Connexion depended on a system of districts with several ministry circuits (societies and stations); churches divided into classes (small group meetings for support and accountability); and, most importantly, itinerant preachers who moved among the circuits (to bring God’s message to all people and provide theological cohesion between the circuits). Thus, physical and spiritual movement were interdependent and central to the mission.

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As David Hempton (2005) puts it, “Methodism was a missionary organization that thrived on mobility and expanded in association with the rise of markets and the growth of empire” (7).

George Whitefield, another founder of Methodism, maintained a more Calvinist belief that individual salvation is predestined by God. This caused a split from the Wesley brothers, who believed in Arminianism, the individual’s ability to atone for sin and achieve sanctification.

INTRODUCTION. THE MIGHTY MOVEMENTS OF ZILPHA PANCO ELAW SHUM

1. Starting with the First Great Awakening, a religious movement that flourished roughly from the 1730s through the 1780s, Protestant revivalism and its outgrowth of spiritual autobiographies were solidified as integral parts of popular culture by the nineteenth century. Known in England as the Evangelical Revival, the movement began as Britain had reached an all-time low of actively religious citizens. The membership in Christian churches, in particular, had been in steady decline since the Napoleonic Wars and reflected a growing disillusionment with the Enlightenment. Several new religious societies formed to foster a renewed investment in Christian piety and became denominations after separating from the Church of England. Many of the new denominations were evangelical, and it didn’t take long before the Protestant evangelical movement crossed the Atlantic, making a significant, permanent impact on the culture of Britain and its American colonies. Fifty years after the First Great Awakening, a second, more expansive Protestant revival swept several nations, including the United States, England, Scotland, and Germany. The Second Great Awakening (1795–1830s) was at its peak when Elaw began her ministry. For more on the Evangelical Revival and its transatlantic growth, see Carwardine (1978), Hindmarsh (2005, 2018), Noll (2001), and Perry (2018).

2. In 1808, Elaw joined the Methodist Episcopal Society in Bristol, Pennsylvania. Jarena Lee, another Black female lay preacher and member of the first African Methodist Episcopal church founded in Philadelphia, mentions sharing a pulpit with Elaw for a brief period when their journeys took them to the same camp meetings. However, there is no evidence in Elaw’s narrative that she was connected in any way with the AME congregation.

3. To date, few literary and religious history scholars have published articles or book chapters on Elaw’s autobiography. See Andrews (1986a), Bassard (1992), Brooks (2023), Carter (2009), Cima (2006), Cullen (2005), Douglass-Chin (2001), Grammer (2003), Hanch (2020, 2022), Haynes (2011), McKay (1989), Moody (2001), Pierce (2005), Prevot (2022), Scotland (2009), Smith (2011), Stanley (2002), Valenze (2006), and Wiegand (2025).

4. Evangelicalism is a Protestant movement based on the conviction that sin is endemic to man’s nature but stressing the value of individual work toward salvation. Its main characteristics, according to David Bebbington, are “conversions . . . activism . . . biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible” and what he calls “crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross” (1998, 2–3). As it relates to Elaw’s ministry, evangelists

believe that it is the responsibility of the church to go out into the world and spread the gospel. The movement “began in the eighteenth century and influential works such as Henry Venn’s *Compleat Duty of Man* (1763) and William Wilberforce’s *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (1797) continued to be read well into the nineteenth century” (Jay 1983, 2). Of the various denominations that practiced this theology, “the Methodist and Baptist communions [were] the two most important Evangelical bodies. . . . Between 1815 and 1860, the forces of Evangelical Protestantism organized in unprecedented fashion in a massive campaign to bring Christ and culture into greater proximity” (Sernett 1975, 27).

Methodism, which began as an established movement within the Anglican church, eventually separated from the church. In *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600–1850*, Marilyn J. Westerkamp (1999) documents that the US denomination grew from almost 65,000 members in 1800 to over 500,000 by 1830. “In 1850, with more than one million members, the Methodist churches reflected the largest evangelical network” in the country (111).

5. Blockett’s 2021 introduction and extensive annotations of the *Memoirs* (Elaw 2021) provide new biographical information and historical context for Elaw’s family life, ministry, and travels.

6. By the 1820s, white women advocating for equal rights had become a national issue. They pointed to their labor in households, churches, hospitals, and wars as evidence of their contributions as citizens and, therefore, their right to legal and economic protections, fair pay, and political representation. American women were reading Mary Wollstonecraft’s British publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to argue for access to higher education rather than being educated solely to meet a future husband’s needs and desires. The 1830s brought more women taking leadership roles (mostly unofficial and unacknowledged) in their churches and, correspondingly, in the abolitionist movement. By the 1840s, women’s colleges and seminaries were opened, and women were prominent in social and political reform movements such as women’s suffrage, as represented at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for women’s rights.

7. Elaw left the United States at a time when women’s religious roles were facing extreme backlash. Catherine A. Brekus notes that “as early as 1830 among the Methodists, and later in the decade among the other denominations, clergymen began to deny that they had ever allowed women into the pulpit, rewriting their histories as if . . . female preachers had never existed. The 1830s and 1840s were difficult decades for female preachers. Besides being slandered as bold and shameless jezebels by mainline clergymen, they also began to lose the institutional support of the churches [that] had once defended them” (1998, 271).

8. According to the Bucks County tax records, some residents of Bristol (including the Mitchells) owned enslaved Africans, but the documentation of taxes on enslaved labor disappeared from the record books by the end of the eighteenth century. Given that the county taxed dogs, cattle, watches, and farm equipment, in addition to land and housing, I suspect manumission rather than tax breaks as the reason for the omissions. Bucks County, Pennsylvania, tax records, 1782–1860, microfilm, 76 rolls, n.d., Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

9. Elaw's 1850 marriage certificate lists her father as "Sancho Pancost, a Butcher." "Marriage Certificate [Zilpha Elaw]. 9 Dec. 1850," England and Wales Civil Registration Indexes, 2:381 (London, England: General Register Office, 1850). However, the 1790 Census lists him as Sanco Panco. Elaw's brother is listed in the records of Utica, New York, as Joseph Panco (or, Pancko), and Rebecca Elaw's obituary gives Elaw's maiden name as Panco. There is no found record of her mother's name. 1790 US Federal Census, census place: Bucks, Pennsylvania, roll: M637_8, p. 52, image: 0640. Obituary (Rebecca [Elaw] Crawford), *Nantucket Journal*, November 1, 1883.

10. "1871 Census of Kew, Surrey, and England," Census Returns of England and Wales, 1871, National Archives of the UK, Public Record Office, class RG10, piece 554, p. 5, folio 140, roll 823397.

11. Elaw does not say where or when she was born, but she does recount her mother's astoundingly sad reproductive history (2021, 53).

12. Elaw's narrative gives the name Pierson Mitchel, but census records and several entries in the Quaker records for the Falls and Middletown Meetings indicate the above spelling.

13. The 1790 census lists the two Panco families just a few entries below the Mitchell family, indicating that they lived very close to each other.

14. Many poor children were indentured at the initiative of either the state or parents in an effort to improve or, more often, stabilize their living situation. The legal contracts were specific and provided for the length of time; type and amount of education and training, if any; levels of basic needs and care (food, shelter, clothing); required labor and behavior of the child; regulatory terms by a civil authority; and a previously determined amount of payment at end of service—all of which was signed and recorded as a governing contract. Indentures typically ended at twenty-one for men and sixteen to eighteen for women, although it could be a decade or two longer for people of color. For women, sometimes a contract stipulated a certain age or marriage, whichever came first. This system, which Ruth Herndon and John Murray term "pauper apprentices," was widely used with varying success from the colonization of North America to the Civil War. The terms *apprentice* and *servant* were sometimes used interchangeably, but often each term was reserved for very specific contracts depending on situation and location, particularly in many of the Southern slave states where local courts were not inclined to have contracts labeling whites as servants. The treatment of the children ranged from loving familial affection to severe abuse (Herndon and Murray 2009, 1–10). The indenture relationship was often a messy mix of master-servant and parent-child dynamics. Race and gender, of course, significantly affected the degree to which children were placed in service and "girls of color benefited the least from the system, exiting indenture with the least literacy training and fewest work skills" (16).

In Elaw's case, being placed with Quaker neighbors who probably had an existing relationship with her parents seemed to work in her favor. Her indenture appears to have been on the familial end of the spectrum, given that she was well educated, and years after Elaw's service ended her "dear old master Mitchel" sent money when she was ill (Elaw 2021, 32). See also Monique Bourque's (2009) discussion of the informal and unique nature of indentures in Southeast Pennsylvania. On the gendered nature of Black indentured servitude, see Dunbar (2008, 27–28).

15. Quakers associated with the Friends General Conference worship together without pulpits or leaders. Their worship meeting is a practice of expectant waiting in order to hear the “still small voice” of God (1 Kings 19:12). They take literally the command to “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) and only speak if they hear a message that must be shared with the community. The Quakers’ assertion that God is in everyone leads them to avoid creeds, abhor violence, and recognize human equality under God. Thus, they were the first Protestant denomination to encourage women preachers.

Quakers were also committed to early education for all children (including Black and Indigenous children) and opened several schools in Philadelphia by 1689. The schools centered ethics and moralism within a science-heavy liberal arts curriculum. By 1800, there were approximately seventy Quaker schools in Pennsylvania. When the Commonwealth began to establish free, public education, Quakers took a leading role, and several of the Quaker elementary schools and secondary academies became public schools. Quakers were the first to educate boys and girls together and the first to protest enslavement.

16. Polemus is referred to as “the traveling preacher, Rev. J. Polhemus [*sic*]” (Elaw 2021, 57).

17. Fullers cleaned wool as one step in the cloth manufacturing process. After industrialization, the word became a general term for textile worker. Elaw may also have been referencing the biblical term, which meant to clean or whiten cloth.

18. Every Methodist society is divided into classes. The classes were originally formed in 1742 as a method to collect money for the needs of the congregation and evolved into small worship groups whose primary function was to provide support and accountability for their members. Concerned that too many congregants were not following his “General Rules” of Methodist living (do no harm, do good, and follow all the ordinances of God), John Wesley determined that these small, local classes of roughly twelve members were ideal structures for maintaining the core principles. Wesley resolved that the new duties of a class leader would be to “inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require.” The weekly class meetings became an expedient method for “watching over one another in love” and were required for membership in a Methodist society (Wesley 1795, 253). Several societies constituted a Methodist district. Itinerant preachers were assigned geographic circuits, a group of Methodist districts.

19. Christian salvation is to be delivered, or saved, from the consequences of human sin. In *Holy Boldness*, Susie C. Stanley (2002) explains that Wesleyan Methodists believed one could achieve Christian perfection through sanctification, the removal of original sin inherited from Adam and Eve. While this could happen through spiritual practice and development, American Methodists believed that sanctification could be granted instantaneously by God (2).

20. Thomas later died at sea, leaving Rebecca to raise their three sons. In 1868, Rebecca married James Crawford (1811–88), a fugitive from enslavement, barber, and Baptist preacher. The couple, well-respected citizens of the island community, are buried in the Crawford family plot in the African Burial Ground. For more on the Pierce-Crawford family, see Elaw (2021).

21. It is, of course, possible that Elaw returned to the United States for a short period. I think it is unlikely because of her age, precarious health, and lack of money. As I explain

later, travel, especially the many weeks necessary for ocean voyages, was uncomfortable and sometimes treacherous for all but the wealthy.

22. “Marriage Certificate [Zilpha Elaw]. 9 Dec. 1850.”

23. The Primitive Methodists were founded in 1807 by Hugh Bourne and William Clowes after they were inspired by American Methodist preacher Lorenzo Dow’s camp meetings. The society, a people’s movement consisting primarily of farm, mill, and factory workers in rural areas, believed that it was returning to the origins of John Wesley’s doctrine. While staying true to the district circuit system formulated by Wesley, Primitive Methodists adopted the American-style open-air revivals that privileged enthusiastic worship, earning them the derogatory nickname “ranter.” Like Wesley, they did not forbid women preaching. Unlike Wesley, they actively supported women’s ministries. By 1838, two years before Elaw’s arrival, the conference meeting reports 67,666 society members. The Primitive Methodists joined the 1932 Wesleyan and United Methodist unification. Elaw also preached for the Bryanites, a small but fast-growing Methodist sect named after William O’Bryan (né Bryant), a Wesleyan preacher in Devon. After their split from the Wesleys in 1815, the Bryanites (also known as the Bible Christians) spread throughout North Cornwall even after O’Bryan left the Methodist denomination in 1832. The Bible Christians were closely aligned with Wesleyan Methodism but did not discourage women preachers. O’Bryan’s wife, Catherine, was one of the many female preachers they employed. Both the Primitive Methodists and the Bryanites struggled in urban areas. Neither was able to secure a large membership or establish many churches in Greater London, but in most other English counties they were at least as popular and sometimes more widespread and established than the Wesleys. Catherine A. Brekus (1998) documents that more than two hundred women were preaching in Great Britain by the 1840s (133). The high number of women preachers and the British ban on enslavement likely contributed to Elaw’s attraction to England. She may have envisioned it as a welcoming space where a Black woman could preach without fear of bondage.

24. 1871 Census of England, folio 140, p. 5.

25. “Death Certificate [Zilpha Shum]. 20 Aug. 1873,” England and Wales Civil Registration Indexes, 1:370, 1873.

26. Several scholars have examined how early Black women evangelists used their exceptional spiritual experiences to refute white supremacy and sexism. See Bostic (2013), Cuffee (2016), Smith (2011), and Williams (1993) as well as Sue Houchins’s introduction to Stewart et al. (1988) and Jean Humez’s introduction to Jackson (1981).

27. Jackson left the AME Church to begin a ministry with the Shakers, and Foote was excommunicated from the AME Zion Church. See Andrews (1986a) and Jackson (1981) for more on these extraordinary women.

28. *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant* (1785) and *Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher* (1798) were both published in England. See Brooks and Saillant (2002).

29. Elaw is one of a few Black women who recorded evangelical travels during the antebellum era. *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836, 1849), *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850, 1853), and Elaw’s autobiography were published as books. *The Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Colored Woman* (1863) was

published as an evangelical tract, and around 1830 Rebecca Cox Jackson started writing of her religious experiences before and after becoming a Shaker eldress, but her work was not published until 1981 as *Gifts of Power* (Jackson 1981), edited by Jean McMahon Humez.

30. I refer to Teresa Zackodnik's (2011) call to "better recognize the important ways in which black preaching women contributed to, even as they challenged, the church as public sphere" (2).

31. In *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*, Frances Smith Foster (1993) documents that "difference and stereotype became reasons to devalue, and in this country, those attitudes created increasingly rigid and codified patterns of racial discrimination. By the mid-eighteenth century, . . . 'Blacks,' 'slavery,' and 'subservience' were becoming synonymous, if not in practice, at least in the minds of the American colonists. Legislation began plainly to differentiate between rights and punishments for whites and for Blacks. For example, Black indentured servants no longer assumed the privileges of full citizenship upon termination of their indenture. . . . By the nineteenth century, free Blacks could no longer vote, live or travel as freely as had their parents" (10). My point here is to call attention to the fact that there were, of course, important legal differences between being free and being owned. However, "law" was a fuzzy matter where Blacks were concerned, and social laws were even fuzzier. Therefore, while there were legal distinctions (distinctions that could be ignored or repealed at the convenience of white landowners), there was little difference between free and enslaved Blacks in the dominant cultural imagination of nineteenth-century America.

32. Grammer (2003) and Stanley (2002) include discussions of Elaw in their studies of nineteenth-century women preachers. Both restrict their focus to gender and argue that the difficulties of being female were the primary obstacles for women preachers, whereas I highlight the interdependence of race, class, and gender in the internal and external realities that shaped the production and reception of Elaw's *Memoirs*. In fact, Stanley (2002) emphasizes in *Holy Boldness* that "gender is the dominant category [and the book] confirms Elizabeth Elkin Grammer's analysis of the spiritual autobiographies of four African American women and three white women. [Grammer] found that 'more often than not, however, the politics of gender overshadows those of race in these spiritual autobiographies'" (17). To argue that resistance to Elaw's preaching, especially during the 1830s, was predominately about her gender decontextualizes Elaw's place in religious history. My work on Elaw teases out the intertwined strands of race, class, and gender. I read Black women's travels to determine when and how any one of those intertwined strands—a complicated weave and pattern—may be predominate at a particular space or place. Thankfully, we now have Kimberlé Crenshaw's brilliant term *intersectionality* to discuss the social realities of people's lives.

33. In fact, as of this printing, many encyclopedic entries still list 1846 as the date of Elaw's death.

34. Spiritual exhorters typically were not theologians but practitioners who persuaded and modeled how best to serve God. The important distinction between exhortation and preaching is that exhorters were to speak about religious experience (often after a sermon) and only licensed preachers were authorized to "take," or read, biblical text and then

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teach it. The hierarchy of a Methodist ministry career for men typically moved from class leader to exhorter, local minister, and then, if qualified, to itinerant preacher. Marriage or failing health would often move itinerant preachers back to being local ministers.

35. All biblical references quote the King James version (Carroll and Prickett 2008).

36. See Carol V. R. George's (1973) influential text *Segregated Sabbaths*.

37. In the 1770s, Black congregations in Georgia and Virginia formed their own Baptist societies. Black New Yorkers built the AME Zion church in 1800. The MEC debates over enslavement resulted in the split of the MEC South, a confederate church, in 1844. After emancipation, the Black Methodists of Jackson, Tennessee, formed the Colored Methodist Church (CME) in 1870, later renamed Christian Methodist Episcopal.

38. Quoted from Martin Delaney's January 16, 1849, letter to Frederick Douglass, published in *The North Star*.

39. In 1822, Charleston's AME church was burned down shortly after one of its preachers, Denmark Vesey, was convicted and hanged for allegedly plotting an insurrection against slavery. Nat Turner, Methodist preacher, was hanged and skinned for planning the 1831 Southampton Insurrection that killed more than fifty white people.

40. The year 1865 is the last for which I have evidence of Elaw's ministry (Elaw 2021, xxvii).

41. Unlike the better-known Jarena Lee, a local preacher who was eventually (and reluctantly) sanctioned by Richard Allen and the AME, Elaw belonged to the MEC with all-white leadership and predominately white membership. The differences in the depth and scope of the two women's ministry compared to where they now stand in the public record is appalling yet not altogether surprising.

CHAPTER 1. "YOU MUST NOT KNEEL HERE!": THE LONG ARC OF BLACK CHURCHES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

1. While Elaw often preached in white churches, that was probably not the case in urban areas such as Philadelphia, where the sheer numbers and economic stability of Black communities meant high levels of social segregation. In Philadelphia, the explosive growth of the Black population, intense abolitionist activity, and accumulation of wealth in the Black community had created heightened concern and fear among the larger population. Black Philadelphians experienced decades of conflict over job competition and the success of the Underground Railroad, which led to several race riots and, in 1838, complete disenfranchisement by the Pennsylvania legislature.

2. Absalom Jones was not admitted into the Episcopal priesthood until 1804, after years of continued appeal from the parishioners.

3. The American Colonization Society, formed in 1816 by Reverend Robert Finley, worked to send the American enslaved to colonies. They believed that permanent segregation was a reasonable method of ending slavery in the United States. The ACS managed to colonize Liberia in 1821, but overall, its efforts failed to convince free African Americans to willingly emigrate. Even though African American discussion of moving to Africa predates the ACS, most were loath to trust the white-run organization that included enslavers.

4. See Nash (1988, 1990), Newman (2008), and N. Wood (2017).