Abstract

The discordant era of Reconstruction was a testing ground for American culture and democracy in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. While historians have long recognized the serious implications of this period and have made Reconstruction a crucial part of the study of American history – and especially with reference to race relations and critical race theory – literary critics have found little of interest, chiefly because the “major” figures of this period were strangely silent. In fact, though, there is a small group of texts written by women during early Reconstruction that respond directly to the war and attempt to imagine the place of African Americans and women in the newly restored nation. I focus on texts by four Northern women writers – three white, one black – which presently dwell in varying degrees of obscurity: Lydia Maria Child’s *Romance of the Republic* (1867), Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868), Anna Dickinson’s *What Answer?* (1868) and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Moses: A Tale of the Nile* (1869) and *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869). These texts share not only a date of composition, but a set of representations and tropes – interracial love and marriage, experimentation with radical kinds of maternity and lastly, the representation and valorization of African American Civil War soldiers. My project recasts this overlooked period and argues that women writers of this period – black and white – were responsible for a vibrantly political literature that advocated a gender and racial equality that had failed to be achieved in practice; the “imagined equality” of my title refers both to the burgeoning women’s movement and the searing questions of racial inequality as slavery was legally ended. The short span of years between the end of the war and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution
(1868) constitutes the missing link in the history of radical activism by women and the fiction and poetry which tries to intervene in postslavery politics.