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## Freedom and Ballgowns: Elizabeth Keckley and The Work of Domesticity

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

KATHERINE ADAMS Freedom and Ballgowns: Elizabeth Keckley and The Work of Domesticity We were shown through the damp cold rooms into the drawing room. The nation's drawing room—where the mobocracy assemble by the light of beautiful chandeliers and circulating amidst rich furniture—great men and accomplished women fancy they live in a country of equality as well as liberty. Query: do they ever feel their inequality more than on such occasions? Catharine Maria Sedgwick, describing a visit to the White House In march of 1866, President Andrew Johnson found occasion to remind Congress that both law and propriety stood against the intermarriage of blacks with whites. Drawing upon the late New York supreme court judge, James Kent, whose essays on constitutional law had become a ptime r in conservative legal thought,

Johnson explained Kent says, speaking of the blacks, that "marriages between them and the whites are forbidden in some of the States where slavery does not exist, and they are prohibited in all the slave holding States; and when not absolutely contrary to law, they are revolting, and regarded as an offence against public decorum." (CRV 75) If the words were not Johnson's, the sentiments were, and had frequently been voiced before.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, however, the context was somewhat obscure. The speech concerned Johnson's veto of the Civil Rights bill, a piece of legislation engineered by the Radical Republicans to extend and protect the rights of newly emancipated blacks. Demonstrating his entrenched racism toward blacks and conciliatory approach to Southern states, the veto marked a turning point in the President's battles with Congress over the design of Reconstruction. Most specifically, it constituted a direct intervention into contemporary debates over how to define and distribute the condition of democratic freedom in the postbellum era. Since emancipation, the Radical Republicans had argued that freedom had no meaning for anyone if not shared equally by all. As one Republican journalist put it, the failure to legislate equal civil rights would not only subvert the aim of emancipation, but tender "all the principles of democracy and freedom upon which our creed of Republicanism rests . . . false" (qtd. in Cox 48). The President, meanwhile, opposed any such move toward racial equality. A former slave-owner who believed blacks an inferior race, Johnson asked, "can it reasonably be supposed that they possess the requisite qualifications to entitle them to all the privileges and immunities of citizens of the United States?" (75). In vetoing this bill, he aimed specifically to prevent the convergence of black and white freedoms and to formalize the differences between them.<sup>1</sup> What, however, might that aim have to do with racial intermarriage—an issue not mentioned in the Civil Rights bill? The answer concerns changes in racist discourse that occurred as white supremacy accommodated itself to the new social, political, legal and economic contexts of Reconstruction. Racial mixing was a persisting theme and personal obsession with Johnson, but it was not his alone. Nor was he first to deploy it within an attempt to mediate access to political freedom. The term "miscegenation," coined just four years before Johnson's speech, had already gained currency in segregationist vocabularies. It had proved convenient for invoking not only the imagined integrity of racial identity and difference but also, crucially, the sanctified image of white domesticity. Johnson acknowledges that interracial marriage lies somewhat outside of his present concerns, but explains that he raises it as an instance of the State policy as to discrimination, and to inquire whether, if Congress can abrogate all State laws of discrimination between the two races in the matter of real estate, of suits, and of contracts generally, Congress may not also repeal the State laws as to the contract of marriage between the two races? Hitherto every subject embraced in the enumeration of rights contained in this bill has been considered as exclusively belonging to the States. They are matters which in each State concern the domestic condition of its people, varying in each according to its own peculiar circumstances and...

KATHERINE ADAMS

## Freedom and Ballgowns: Elizabeth Keckley and The Work of Domesticity

We were shown through the gallery cold water into the drawing room. The parlors drawing room—where the nobles were seen to be the light of beautiful chandeliers and circulating roundly shrouded, no—great men and accomplished women busy themselves in conversation of politics as well as liberty. Quays do they ever feel their mutuality more than on such occasions?

Catherine Maria Sedgwick, describing a visit to the White House.

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