

CHAPTER I

**Ann Plato**



*Hartford's Literary Enigma*

Because so little is known about Ann Plato, literary history has offered her investigators no choice but to consign her to a status as a writer, poet, and teacher of minor importance in early nineteenth century Hartford, Connecticut. Her reputation, confined to African American literary history, rests solely on the prose and poems published in her single book of 1841, *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry*; one of its poems, "Reflections, Written upon Visiting the Grave of a Venerated Friend," had been published in the 5 September 1840, issue of *The Colored American* weekly newspaper with the word "Lines" in the title instead of "Reflections." Her place and date of birth and her family particulars are unknown; documents relevant to black Hartford applaud her reticent presence as a teacher from 1842 to 1847 in one of the city's two schools for colored children. Since 1988, Trinity College in Hartford has offered the Ann Plato Pre/Post-Doctoral Diversity Fellowship. After 1847, Plato vanishes, and she seems to appear nowhere else in the public record until the 1870 Iowa federal census.

Neither in documents nor in her writings has she provided posterity with more than the slightest circumstantial information about herself. And neither were her birth nor death officially recorded by the states of Connecticut or New York. Born in 1823 or 1824, she can only be reckoned implicitly in any federal census for New York or any of the southern New England states from 1830 to 1850. With the notable exception of her listing in Hartford's Talcott Street [or Colored] Congregational Church catalogue of 1842,<sup>1</sup> there are no other church records. There are no schooling records, their absence thus preventing verification of her education. Absence of both kinds of documentation coincides

historically with officials in Connecticut only beginning to maintain such documentation consistently. Constructing a profile of Ann Plato means paying serious attention to her discursive strategies and her activities in Hartford's colored community. She is probably related to other Plato families of color on Long Island (most likely Montauketts) and in Connecticut (Montaukett immigrants). With her writings expressing deeply felt pieties and for her commitment to teaching children, she can be included as a young woman of color among the black women writers of the early nineteenth century who, Frances Smith Foster observes in *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*, worked “within the Cult of True Womanhood, [creating] a literature dedicated to moral improvement and social welfare.” These women wrote to a general public, Foster asserts, on themes sometimes “blatantly political” but “routinely articulated in religious terms.” Their objectives were couched in moral didacticism, even as they addressed abolitionism and the kindred social issues that came to overlap with early nineteenth-century topics such as religious conversion and piety.<sup>2</sup>

Researching this nineteenth-century author, who left virtually no personal track record other than her teaching, resembles trying to garner the sparse information on a young early nineteenth-century British poet, Susan Evance, who published two poetry collections (1808 and 1818) and was a devout Christian, yet “remains relatively unknown.” Like Plato, her poems emphasized piety and were deemed appropriate for “impressionable young minds.” The comparison stops there, for Evance married and had children, but her fate remains a mystery.<sup>3</sup>

Scrutiny of some of Plato's poems and prose should help demystify her identity and background and enlarge the distinct likelihood of her Native heritage as well as her unsteady allegiance to it. J. Saunders Redding took this at face value in 1967, and Vernon Loggins had proposed it in *The Negro Author in America* in 1931 by virtue of the father in Plato's poem “The Natives of America,” but decades passed before Ann Shockley, in the Ann Plato entry for *Afro-American Women Writers 1746–1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* (1988) and Quandra Prettyman's brief biography in *Africana*, compiled by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates (1999), would echo them. Yet, none of these critics consider the complex dynamics experienced by a woman who may have come from a household where one or both parents may have been Natives but found social refuge and work in an urban black community. All of them bypass strategies that would allow them to view her in terms of being Native.

Subject-area bibliographies for American literature came about later in the nineteenth century. Volume 15 of the *Bibliotheca Americana: A Dictionary of Books Relating to America*, published in 1885, lists Plato and *Essays*, followed by a curious comment: “The writer was also known as the colored Sappho,” probably due to Plato's reputation as a lyric poet and teacher. No other bib-

liographies, including the *Report* of 1893–1894 compiled by the United States Bureau of Education and W. E. B. DuBois's *A Select Bibliography of the Negro American* (1905), list her until *A Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry*, by Arthur A. Schomburg, the renowned Puerto Rican-born bibliophile, who may have instigated early twentieth-century attention to her with this book, which was published in 1916. Having no political stance may have kept her off early compilations; whatever reservations Schomburg may have had, he put them aside to list her as a poet, and he deserves credit for her protracted revival. In 1945, Howard University librarian Dorothy B. Porter listed Plato and *Essays* in *North American Negro Poets: A Bibliographical Checklist of Their Writings, 1760–1944*, giving the pages where her poems appear and providing five sources where the book could be found.<sup>4</sup>

In a brief evaluation of her book in the 1924 *An Anthology of Verse by American Negroes* (which does not include any of her poems), James Hardy Dillard does not take up this issue, referring in the “Introduction” to her poems: “her Congregational minister . . . says that she should be encouraged on account of her youth and because such efforts dignify the Negro race, but her verses are so absolutely jejune and devoid of intellect and imaginative life that their service to her race is doubtful.” Dillard was the first in the twentieth century to critically evaluate her. In their closing “Bibliographical and Critical Notes” section, editors White and Jackson summarize the quality of her poems, citing examples by title as “earnest, illiterate, and vapid, with occasional errors in grammar and spelling, and strained rhymes”; they refer to her essays as “short and commonplace and on general subjects.” Loggins also thought little of her poetry; because of her detachment and “girlish restraint,” he stated unsympathetically, abolitionists would have found her “useless in the fight for emancipation.”<sup>5</sup> The anthology editors and Loggins may have influenced two young African American scholars in the 1930s to omit her from their respective first books on African American literary history, or they may not have learned about her: Benjamin Mays, more a theologian than literary historian, in *The Negro's God, as Reflected in His Literature* (1938), and Redding himself, in *To Make A Poet Black* (1939).<sup>6</sup> Sterling Brown, close to echoing Loggins in *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937), described Plato's poems as “Connecticut Methodism” counterparts to Wheatley in Boston; “her work, sponsored as showing the Negro to be ‘educable,’” he affirmed, “is without literary value, and was overshadowed by the literary work of really educated Negroes.”<sup>7</sup> Mays's omission is curious because he briefly discussed Rev. James W. C. Pennington's writings; he must have realized that Pennington wrote the introduction for *Essays*.

From the sparse nineteenth-century records, one senses that Plato shunned being documented by state and federal authorities; the countenance emerging from this and from the pious personality of her writing suggests that she was a young eccentric. *Essays* is the prominent record we have of her. That she may

be the woman enumerated in a later federal census in the Midwest is highly plausible. The 1870 Iowa Federal census lists a forty-six-year-old “Miss Plato” residing in Decorah Township, Winneshiek County, in the household of a family of seven who were also boarding two Norwegian-born women servants in their twenties. This “Miss Plato” had been born in New York and was literate but had “No occupation.”<sup>8</sup> That this woman is identified as white does not in itself derail the prospect that Miss Plato and Ann Plato are one.

Two men enumerated the town of Decorah. The principal enumerator for the F. B. Landers household where “Miss Plato” resided was O. N. Olson, of Norwegian heritage. The second, writing a bold and sharp “N” in New York for Miss Plato’s birthplace, was Cyrus Wellington. It was he who superimposed the “For” over the “k” ending New York, betraying that he perceived her as different from the white women he and Olson daily encountered. Harley Refsal, of Luther College’s Scandinavian Studies Program, never hesitated to suspect a Norwegian influence on Anglo-Iowan linguistic culture. Norwegian *Fremmed* signifies “stranger” or “foreigner”; “Fre” and “Fer” are interchangeable in Norwegian-Iowan vernacular, thus serving as the basis for how we interpret “For.”<sup>9</sup> What the enumerators thought her to be is important. After this she disappears again, deepening the mystery about her.

Researchers of nineteenth-century free people of color occasionally succeed when documentary records yield details of vital statistics, land and probate circumstances, and church affiliations. But the absence of records for particular individuals amid records for those to whom they may be related or who are their neighbors or associates is frustrating. A simple fact is that researchers seeking free persons of color have difficulty finding them because they are not well documented in the record, and some are simply absent. The Barbour Collection, established in 1928 and renowned in Connecticut among genealogists, librarians, and historians as a major resource, remains incomplete and lacks many records for persons of color. In a few particular instances, what information it does contain does not corroborate Barbara W. Brown and James M. Rose in their invaluable *Black Roots in Southeastern Connecticut, 1650–1900*.<sup>10</sup> A researcher who cannot visit the Connecticut State Library will find the “Reg-

36		Christopher Belle	27	M	W	Domestic serv.	✓		↓ Norway	1	1
37		Flora Jima	26	F	W	Domestic serv.	✓		↓ Norway	1	1
38		Plato Miss	46	F	W	No occupation			New York		
39	205 202	Eleventh L. B.	45	M	W	L. g. merchant	1860	1800	New York		

FIGURE 1.1. Enumeration for Miss Plato. Iowa Federal Census, Decorah, Winneshiek County, 1870.

istry of Deaths,” for example, retrievable in the Barbour Collection, yet these resources complement one another for completeness. Outside Connecticut is a similar example involving another female writer of color, Julia C. Collins, a schoolteacher, of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, whose unfinished novel, *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*, was serialized in the *Christian Reporter* during 1864 and 1865, when she died of consumption, leaving a husband and children. As editors of the first-time book version explain, everything known about her dates strictly from twenty-one months of literary visibility.<sup>11</sup>

Hypothesizing Plato’s life as a Native woman should help scholars appreciate some complexities in the nexus of Native and African American social relationships. Her literary and teaching activities occur during an eight-year period of the antebellum era, when northern blacks continued to organize politically and create social institutions, a period coinciding with state and national governments accomplishing the removal of Indians from the Southeast, with those Natives surviving in eastern North America skeptical about “Americanization.” Her life and identity raise questions of how race made an impact on her social choices, her education, her desire to teach, and her religious orientations.

Plato’s writings in fact neither assert nor celebrate any discernible African ancestral allusions or African American consciousness, but because Pennington introduces her book by identifying her as a “colored lady” of his Congregational Church, literary historians view her strictly in terms of African American writing and assign to her an identity that is strictly that of a black woman. For example, Katherine Clay Bassard, Shockley, and Prettyman, all of whom reflect the sympathetic turn in Ann Plato scholarship, contend that her specific audience was black schoolgirls. Bassard formulates her as part of a female black literary community in which the members were dialogically involved with each other’s work, with Phillis Wheatley being their influential and major intertextual inspiration. In my estimation, Plato’s legacy, if not her identity alone, is much more complex; her literary posture and some of the signs in her writings suggest rather persuasively that African American religious and teaching venues were but a social refuge for a young woman in Hartford’s 1830s and 1840s who possessed some perhaps vague ties to a Native community that survived by “hiding in plain sight,” which characterized many such communities in the Northeast and along the mid-Atlantic coast. Based on my personal knowledge of Native ancestry, I would say that she seems not fully committed to an African American identity. Her writing betrays a separation of public presence and private disposition. Writing during the height of the fervent debate in Connecticut and New York over abolition and civil rights, she left to literary posterity virtually nothing from which to glean the information that the excitement and tensions of a struggle for black freedom swirled around her; nothing in *Essays* alludes to specific persons such as William Lloyd Garrison, the Hartford-born Maria Stewart, or David Walker or events such as the public

pressure levelled on Prudence Crandall and her school in Canterbury (1833) that led to Connecticut's Black Law (1834), physical attacks against persons of color, and, more immediately, the cause célèbre of the *Amistad* Africans in New Haven during 1839–1841, whose defenders also were Congregationalists with missionary objectives. Hers is a remote, virtually disembodied voice: although her poem “To the First of August” acknowledges the end of slavery in the British Caribbean, the father she addresses in “The Natives of America” in turn narrates to her with great passion an intimately painful investment. In fact, although her “Natives” poem projects an Indian's sadness and his will to survive, comments in her prose reveal her as unsteady and ambiguous by contrast. Meanwhile, she observes in her biography of Julia Ann Pell how school children of a “station inferior” to their mates “had their rights trampled upon” and were deliberately neglected. To emphasize that Native or black pupils in southeastern Connecticut would have experienced this schoolroom abuse overlooks how Plato covertly embeds her disdain for their condition in carefully chosen rhetoric (see chapter 10).

Plato is far more reticent about identifying herself racially or biracially than Olivia Ward Bush-Banks (1869–1944), who wrote prose, poetry, and skits. Bush-Banks, born in Sag Harbor in eastern Long Island, claimed parents of Montaukett descent and attended the Poosepatuck [Unkechaug] Indian Reservation school in Mastic, where some of her father's relations lived. Taking on a biracial identity, Bush-Banks described herself as a “colored person,” and while she participated in Indian affairs, writing a poem titled “Morning on Shinnecock” and a drama titled *Indian Trails; or Trail of the Montauk*, she “concurrently retained a Montauk Indian and Afro-American ethos” according to her great-grandniece and Montaukett member Bernice Forrest (Guillaume), editor of *The Collected Works of Olivia Ward Bush-Banks*. Guillaume asserts that Bush-Banks's “protest poetry and essays mirror her acceptance of an official, if inaccurate, social categorization as an African American.”<sup>12</sup> In the manner of intellectual and social activist sisterhood, for Bush-Banks, it was the Harlem Renaissance that attracted her vigorous participation; three-quarters of a century earlier, Plato had responded by teaching in one of Hartford's African schools after publishing her book. Plato's writings demonstrate how piety encourages acquiescence to the status quo.

Very brief notices distinguish critical scholarship on Ann Plato, and *scholarship* may be too generous a term. Justifying why an unknown writer of qualitatively questionable significance should be taken seriously simply because she is a woman of color betrays academic gatekeeping. David O. White gave Ann Plato's teaching experience its first deserved discussion in a 1974 article: “Hartford's African Schools, 1830–1868.”<sup>13</sup> Since the 1980s, however, as more women writers, including those of color, have gained critical attention and classroom reading, Plato's obscurity has begun to lessen in relative terms as some atten-

tion has been given to her literary topics. Still, there is no book-length study, and only Bassard offers one lengthy chapter about her. An attempt at critical discussion early in the contemporary period was made by Shockley in 1988. Kenny G. Williams's introduction for Oxford University Press's Schomburg reprint of *Essays* gives general information, careful in its speculations about her life and parents and pointing out Plato's debt to Wheatley. Bassard evolved her 1992 doctoral dissertation, "Spiritual Interrogations: Conversion, Community and Authorship in the Writings of Phillis Wheatley, Ann Plato, Jarena Lee, and Rebecca Cox Jackson," into a book in 1999: *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. Perhaps because her focus is strictly on an African American literary ethos, Bassard does not consider any influence by other poets on Ann Plato.<sup>14</sup> Prettyman closed her *Africana* biography by saying that although her poems "clearly show the work of a young person . . . [they also] show a lyric gift."<sup>15</sup> Katharine Capshaw Smith's entry, "Ann Plato," in the *Dictionary of American Biography* offers the fullest literary biography in a dictionary or encyclopedia, reproducing Plato's two notes to a Hartford schools official, as did White, but by neglecting to mention "The Natives of America," it betrays Smith's dismissal of this Indian dimension in her subject's life. Michelle Diane Wright, in *Broken Utterances: A Selected Anthology of 19th Century Black Women's Social Thought*, echoes the points of view and assumptions made by Williams, Shockley, Foster, and Bassard.<sup>16</sup> Journalists, particularly in Connecticut, have written about Ann Plato in ways pro forma to her significance as a black woman author defying presumptions of ignorant and unlettered nineteenth-century persons of color.<sup>17</sup>

All these commentaries bear similarities in presumptive details about Plato. They tend to agree on 1820 as her year of birth and that Hartford, Connecticut, is her birthplace; Smith differs by guessing that her birth year is 1824, assuming Henry and Deborah Plato are her parents. Bassard and Wright also insist on this couple as her parents, and Wright and Smith overlook the household of Alfred Plato, an African American, as an unreliable sibling alignment. Shockley and Prettyman appear to take seriously the possibility of Ann Plato having Native ancestry, but Shockley, like Williams and Bassard, insists that she nevertheless wrote specifically for black schoolgirls. Two critics who consider Plato's Native ancestry in a more serious light but do not develop this thesis include Judith Ranta, who mentions her in her book on Betsey Chamberlain, an Algonquian mill worker and journalist of unspecified tribe, and Jonathan Brennan in the introduction to his edited essay collection *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote*. Kiara M. Vigil and Tiya Miles pursue this in "At the Crossroads of Red/Black Literature."<sup>18</sup>

Theorizing an identity for Ann Plato according to race and ethnicity demands strenuous inquiry of a depth these critics have not attempted; perceiving her solely as African American thwarts an epistemology they could have

pursued for a new method that would take her into account as an Indian girl who sought refuge in an urban space while she tried to exercise a demeanor exclusive of race and to embrace God's grace for humanity. Plato and the four young women she writes about appear to come from a milieu best understood as *Missinnuok*, a Narragansett term signifying "the [Native] people" of southern New England and eastern Long Island.<sup>19</sup> Forwarding such an analysis means entertaining an identity paradox: an *Indian* adolescent, perhaps mixed racially, eschewing self-ascription to being either Indian or *Negro*, but accepting community by publishing in the *Colored American* newspaper and becoming part of a Colored Congregational denomination that administers an "*African School*" where she will teach for six years. I have emphasized the above terms because in early nineteenth-century America, they denote a slippery deployment in official documentation and casual designation parlance that exerts hegemony over, first, how Natives may lose their identities unless they consciously resist such a change and, second, how Natives who felt resistance to being seen as futile passed into mainstream white and black society. Throughout the eastern colonies and states, Natives were not simply displaced from their traditional homeland territories: especially, but not exclusively, if they moved outside of those territories, they were witness to and experienced being socially overwhelmed by peoples of European or African background. Adding Christianity's promises to their condition resulted in many off-reservation Indian families and individuals accepting, fully or tentatively, their new identities as "colored" people, risking the loss of their Native tribal cultural integrity and identity yet still uncertain about how they were expected to fit in and adjust to African American identity, a conundrum that continues for some into the twenty-first century. Urban refuge invited some who felt disenfranchised by tribal communities or voluntarily moved away, and these families established urban Indian enclaves in Hartford and other cities. Colored Congregational, presumed to be a "black" church, was interracial, with blacks and Natives, thus unsettling the research expectation for black exclusivity and creating a new paradigm for Hartford's nonwhite community.

Advocating that an allegiance to her Native American background is what drew Plato to pay attention to her father and the ill-fated young women, because they were Natives, is to interpret that allegiance as expressing community formation. Under the influence of Holly Jackson's thesis about the cultural identity of late nineteenth-century novelist Emma Dunham Kelley, this means taking a risk to determine a Native quality hovering over *Essays*, to (theoretically) balance critical opinion that Plato wrote her book for black girls. Just as Jackson fields theories of "the representative blackness of African American authors,"<sup>20</sup> an epistemology can be advanced to affirm that *Essays* is counterintuitive to an exclusively African American sensibility. Plato's "Natives of America" poem is the best indicator of a conscious Native expression, despite



Francis Foster's curiously insistence on it as a metaphor for the black experience. The eulogies must be read more carefully. Then, should Plato's poem "To the First of August" be the agent that essentializes Plato as African American despite its shallow emotional investment in its subject? Despite lacking specifics about Plato's tribal relations, I will use "Natives of America" to underpin her status as an author, and I will place in the abstract a social and cultural responsibility that her woman's voice takes on with respect to other Natives in her community. Her father's story, as I will delineate in the next chapter, is expectedly male centered, yet, recast through her composition, it is an origin story, and its unfolding narrative renders, perhaps unwittingly, if we want to argue the consciousness of this creative act, the preservation of an immediate legacy shared father to daughter. The poem holds a central, even pivotal place in the philosophy and theology contained in *Essays*. Although its author was limited in her life experiences by her youth, she still attempted to convey her book's importance to Christianized urban Indians.

The kind of failure Jackson pronounces as "the breakdown of racial legibility," pertaining to research on Kelley,<sup>21</sup> also unsettles Plato from African American exclusivity, for even those few scholars who in recent years seem willing to acknowledge her Native ancestry have not known where to look to justify their claims, nor have they considered how that aspect of her background leads her to indulge in the lives of young women who may be like herself.

### A Curious Narrative by "Ann"

In the 19 June *Colored American* newspaper, almost three weeks after Pennington dated his introduction to *Essays*, a narrative, "Little Harriet," was reprinted from the *Weekly Messenger*, a title likely abbreviated from *The Journal of Education and Weekly Messenger*, published in New York City and geared to the interests of "Colored Teachers."<sup>22</sup> At approximately 960 words, it bears the simple authorship of "Ann" and piques one's attention because of its reflexive and allegorical nature. Here is a synopsis:

The third-person narrator describes Little Harriet (sometimes referred to as "Little H."), the nurse for Mrs. Perkins's youngest child. Mrs. Perkins instructs Harriet to tell an expected visitor she is not at home. Being instructed to lie affronts Harriet's conscience; her Sabbath-school teacher had admonished her students that lying in childhood becomes habitual. When Harriet tells her employer that she cannot lie, Mrs. Perkins upbraids her, chastising the Sabbath school teacher and telling Harriet that her own children obey her. Harriet's high moral character absolves her conscience, but Mrs. Perkins fires her. Harriet's mother, "an intemperate, worthless

woman," had long forsaken her, and shows no sympathy for her plight. Wandering the streets, Harriet encounters a Mrs. Jewell, who befriends her because she needs a young girl for domestic help. In the Jewell household, Harriet receives an English education and deeper religious teaching from Susan Jewell, the daughter. The narrative ends with two stanzas from Isaac Watts's poem "Against Lying" (not included in the word count).

The narrative exhibits a matrix of relationship around Harriet representing variables of power. That Mrs. Perkins and Harriet's mother offset Mrs. Jewell and Susan is easy to determine, but the axial power dynamics are subtle. All are presumably Christians and their names are probably substitutes. Mrs. Perkins, stern and dramatic, expels Harriet; the serene and patient Mrs. Jewell accepts her. Harriet's unsympathetic mother contrasts with Susan filling the void of instruction with love and sobriety. Great is the temptation to find Ann Plato's signature in this allegory, for its properties align with her personality, and the book is consistent with her youth, piety and education, and poetics. She very likely read British author Amelia Opie's taxonomic collection of stories and philosophy of truthfulness and falsehood in *Illustrations of Lying, in All Its Branches*, reprinted in Hartford before *Essays*. She would have read the chapter "Lies of Convenience," which opens with a "Not at home" example.<sup>23</sup> "Little Harriet" is an allegory partner to Plato's essays "Diligence and Negligence" and "Two School Girls." Harriet is probably six to ten years old. Although a school setting is never specifically identified, Harriet lived by the instruction of her "pious teachers," not parental or employer guidance. She is put out by her employer for refusing to abandon her conscience and tell lies. Instruction in an English education would not mean grammar and rhetoric alone, but also history, geography, arithmetic, and Bible study. Why not send Harriet to school? Public education cost money, but she has become a ward of the Jewell household—it would be cheaper for Susan to teach her. Her race is unidentified, another practice Plato followed, especially in self-reference. Since Ann-the-narrator leaves us with the assumption that the Perkins and Jewell households are white, should we not risk presuming that Harriet's mother is too? Just because the narrative's original publisher, *The Weekly Messenger*, was created for the benefit of colored teachers does not guarantee exclusive race consciousness in its narrative content. Even *Colored American* editors did not adhere to exclusivity by race. But if Harriet was a colored child, even of fair complexion, schools might not have welcomed her, which leads to the question of what streets in which city or town this narrative is set or projected. By the time she was about the (speculated) age of ten, in 1834, Beman had started teaching at the school Colored Congregational operated on Talcott Street, but she may not have been there at that time. Other possible locations, such as New Haven or towns on

eastern Long Island, should not be discounted; Plato has an affinity for New Haven, a site in the title of one essay and implied by one poem.<sup>24</sup> Harriet would have deemed cutting herself off from her “intemperate, worthless” mother the right thing to do, as she was shown no sympathy by her and felt wronged by her severity. The mother is given to strong drink, a sot, and she turns from her daughter as though Harriet had made her own problems. Being disposed of by employer and mother compounds the necessity for her becoming homeless. In fact, with no father mentioned in the narrative, does being jettisoned by her mother make her an orphan?

Being schooled by Susan Jewell is Harriet’s extraordinary good fortune, and *Essays* demonstrates an earnestly learned English education. Plato’s essay “Obedience” is a forerunner of or companion piece to “Little Harriet” by virtue of Plato’s admonishment to her readers that God will bless dutiful parents, “but he will punish, in the most signal and terrible manner, all those who, by parental negligent conduct, set at defiance his written law, and violate that holy and just principle which has been implanted in every human breast.” Going on, she says, “the greatest loss that can befall a child, is to be deprived of pious and affectionate parents.”<sup>25</sup> People who do not know obedience cannot expect it to be learned from them. I read “Obedience” as the lesson and “Little Harriet” as the allegorical illustration. Closing with stanzas from Isaac Watts’s poem also shows her propensity to quote and interpolate.

The narrative’s absence of a husband-father figure provides dramatic effect. Speculation tempts us to consider that all the male counterparts to these three women are either at work or deceased, have left their families, or do not contribute to their families’ well-being. Harriet’s absent father holds a pivotal position because of how his identity contrasts with Plato’s active father figure in *Essays*; he is the equivalent of the book author–persona’s nonexistent mother. Plato’s Indian father left for other environs but not before gifting his child with a story she asked him to tell in “The Natives of America.” Harriet’s “intemperate, worthless” mother exhibits bitterness and a determined lack of concern for her child’s fate; she virtually throws her daughter away. Because she is saved by the Jewell household, we can read her identity as the Ann who literarily forsook her own mother in *Essays* and, in a final stroke, covertly used the public venue of the new teachers publication to relate her circumstances, which the *Colored American* then reprinted and brought to a wider audience.

I suspect Plato omitted her mother from *Essays* because the woman verbally abused her, degrading her loving father and her because of him. Both parents’ dispositions must have affected Plato indelibly, although vestiges of her bond with her departed father would be reconciled in Hartford, but her mother had to have created a deeper rift in her sensibility, which her writings took into account with adroit subtlety. Likely she spoke ill of the father as a heathen refusing Christianity and lived out her contradictions. The pieces of

this puzzle dovetail, fitting together well enough for me to propose Ann Plato as a candidate for Ann the fictive narrator with the character Harriet as her covert identity.<sup>26</sup>

### Ann Plato: A Theory of the Stranger

I want to articulate here a theory of the stranger as a strategy for approaching what this book will surmise about Ann Plato's opaque biography. By using this theory, we can encompass Reverend Pennington's evident need to justify her as a colored woman but foreground his perception by means of the milieu in which Natives found themselves as they were forced to move around in the Missinnuok territory.

Any nonwhite person and his or her community in nineteenth-century North America would be or was destined to become a stranger in the land. The alienation this status belied affected Indians and blacks in some ways similarly but more so very differently. The comparison is familiar: blacks were strangers in a land far from their ancestral Africa, yet, by the second and succeeding generations, they had adapted to and reconciled with their new space; Natives were made strangers in their own lands, invasion and colonialism transforming their homelands into wilderness and their life circumstances into poverty. Relocations of various kinds ensued. People of the African diaspora sought social and religious stability in a new land, ever mindful of the faraway home they adapted into their religious songs and ecumenical language. Those Natives who left reservations or defined Native territories among the Missinnuok stayed in that territory. Out-marriages and unions produced this protracted exodus, as did the hope that one would be accepted in another tribe's territory. As will be shown, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Mohegans in Uncasville, Connecticut, to a greater extent, and the Eastern Pequots of nearby Stonington and North Stonington complained to their overseers and the courts in Connecticut about there being too many "mulattoes" (Indians mixed with black) and "strange Indians" on their lands. Individuals and families directly or indirectly pertinent to Ann Plato research likely experienced this social pressure to leave those unfriendly surroundings.

Natives in early nineteenth-century Hartford would have been strangers to European American urbanity, and they would have had to adapt to it if they intended to stay or realized they could not be part of a tribal enclave. Residing in Hartford placed them in a condition of being strangers in colored society. We may never know the range of tensions Hartford's Natives experienced in the 1820s as they faced becoming part of the African Religious Society that led to the founding of first the Colored Congregational Church and, in the next decade, the breakaway Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Certainly this social enclave negotiated the fitting of their Native heritage into black Hartford,

as they adopted “colored” identity as the workable solution. Members of this enclave were equivocally clannish, eccentric, and might be individualistic in asserting their social distinctiveness. Ann Plato’s choice of women for eulogies reflects this; correspondences about Gertrude Plato, who may or may not have been her relative, also lead us to this assumptive conclusion; but George A. Spywood, a Wampanoag and Narragansett Indian, served as a minister and then bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion faith.<sup>27</sup>

A theory of the stranger can be applied to Ann Plato in three instances: Pennington’s “To the Reader,” the attitude of her writing, and her enumeration in the 1870 Iowa census. These three will be elucidated throughout the text, but this immediate discussion establishes a précis for an applicable theory. We have to entertain older critical theories about strangers to avoid the recent predominating theories contextualized in postmodern and postcolonial paradigms.<sup>28</sup> In fact, a treatise from 1769, *The Stranger Unknown’s Call to Holiness of Heart*, bears influential sentiments for Plato. Although its anonymous author narrates the experience of seeking faith and finding it in terms far more dramatic than Plato exhibits in *Essays*, his admonition to “diligently enquire and rightly understand” the “saving Knowledge” resonates in her book.<sup>29</sup>

The parable of the Levitical stranger bears relationship to Pennington’s description; Leviticus 19:34<sup>30</sup> reads: “*But* the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I *am* the LORD your God.”<sup>31</sup> Pennington’s introduction of Plato treats her as a stranger, not an outcast, but consistent with the Levitical embrace, he accepts her by bestowing praise on her example. She may not be outside his sense of the colored families in his congregation, but something about her caused an initial caution, which he overcame. However long she resided in Hartford, she arrived there a Congregationalist predisposed to worship at that particular church. If she could have passed for white, what motivated her to join this community? What sense of belonging drew her to it?

### Studies of Rhetoric

Plato’s problematic racial and cultural identity and the heretofore mentioned presumptions of her black racial exclusivity and social commitments continue to preoccupy scholarly references about her and to distract serious inquiries about the content of her writing. That selected essays are discussed in two studies of early nineteenth-century rhetoric illustrates a turning point of sorts in Ann Plato scholarship. Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, in *Imagining Rhetoric: Composing Women of the Early United States* (2002), briefly describe Ann Plato’s rhetorical strategies as found in her “school compositions,” and Silvia Xavier’s “Engaging George Campbell’s *Sympathy* in the Rhetoric of Charlotte Forten and Ann Plato: African-American Women of the Antebellum North,” in *Rhetoric*

*Review* (2005), discusses Ann Plato's prose strategies through rhetorical high theory but otherwise falls short because Forten seems to be the preferred subject.<sup>32</sup> The structure and content of *Essays* facilitates interpreting it as a kind of conduct book for the middle of the nineteenth century, as Plato's reading audience was whomever she conceptualized as young misses of color: black girls, urban off-reservation Indian girls, or, in general, white girls. At this important time in the survival of people of color during antebellum anxieties and looming threats and actual cases of Indian removal, Plato does make a case for the uplift of school-aged children by means of tools written by and about role models provided to her judgment. That judgment betrays its youth and her times, of course, when she extols legendary European conquerors and speaks unflatteringly about the world's inhabitants outside of Protestant Western Europe.

Plato's persistent reliance upon pieties and the earnestness of her ethereal didactic manner justify reading *Essays* as a conduct book. She implores her readers to live according to the dictates of religion and education and to better themselves in youth in order to lessen the impact of life's vicissitudes while maintaining and strengthening the wisdom of lessons offered by religion; this represents her form of the model. The ideal of "true womanhood" ensconcing the teaching of girls and young women to prepare them to refine their lives for the domestic sphere is not Ann Plato's intent, nor are feminist politics. Her adaptation of the eighteenth-century nonfiction conduct book to Congregationalist pieties based on her adaptation of New Light Congregationalist thinking can also be overlooked when Ann Plato scholarship seeks this political realm.

Before closing, there is another matter related to composition to which I want to call attention. In the one review of *Essays* written, apparently, during her lifetime, the editor of the *Knickerbocker* magazine in 1848, for all his condescending tone (I will return to this review in chapter 6), momentarily lets down his guard to call her a "thinker," and I believe him to be sincere in doing so even as he found a pun in her name. Her racial identity, I admit, will preoccupy much of this book just as others extol her, but her prose—and it was to that he emitted his remark—reveals a religious mind, and "thinker" is the most generous one-word accolade ever given her. We presume that editors have read widely but perhaps not too deeply for their bibliophilic miscellanies; this editor recognized an engaged and organized intellect, qualified as of color, as he saw it, enough to praise her for having the interpolative skill to put Lydia Sigourney's influence into her own ideas. I say there is nothing wrong with presenting her as a religious writer.

The enigma of Ann Plato invites an interdisciplinary approach to text analysis, religion, race, and culture. She borrows from other authors with impunity according to the convention of her day. The principal object for discussion in this book is *Essays*, for it follows the text arrangement of Lydia Sigourney's popular *The Girl's Reading Book, in Prose and Poetry, for Schools*, first published

in 1838 and reprinted a dozen times by 1841.<sup>33</sup> Although borrowing freely from Sigourney's essays, the youthful Plato was smart enough and self-motivated enough to diverge and pursue her own thoughts. Authorial piety not only is self-evident, it determines both her content and her cultural restraint. The Almighty is her answer to life's issues and responsibilities, the spiritual backbone to the part of her education that was not confined to the classroom. In social consciousness, religion and piety prefigure her effacement within her ambiguities. Plato is a father's daughter left with a lesson in culture history, a mother's daughter forsaken, and God's child in a community for whom she teaches and writes.