
Transatlantic Class Construction in Eliza Potter's *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*

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Abstract

Eliza Potter, a free-born black hairdresser who caters to an elite white clientele, devotes the first two chapters of her autobiography *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* (1859) to her travels through England and France, a period of her life overlooked by scholars. While traveling through Europe, Potter comments on the difference in how "class" is constructed in the United States and Europe and juxtaposes differing standards of behavior for American and European white women. As Potter makes clear throughout her autobiography, her position as a hairdresser has bestowed upon her the authority with which to make such observations. Potter, one of the first in a long line of black female hair care entrepreneurs, was called on at all hours of the day and had unfiltered access to the inner lives of her clientele. One of the hazards of her occupation was that she bore witness to a wide variety of phenomena, whether she wanted to or not: "I made up my mind to settle down and be quiet-to see and not see, to hear and not hear-but I found it was impossible to do this and continue my occupation as a hair-dresser" (Potter 230). Among the things that Potter found it impossible to not see nor hear was the class performance of white women-the theatrics of white femininity, both those of the upper-classes and those who aspired to be part of the upper-class. This paper examines Potter's construction of class and her commentary on the difference in class performance between American and European white women.

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