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Kent Anderson Leslie. *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995. 237 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by

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Not exactly a biography, Kent Anderson Leslie's thoughtful and thoroughly researched treatment of Amanda America Dickson follows the life and times of the "wealthiest colored woman in the world." Happily, Leslie resists the temptation to make Dickson into a symbol of all the African American women born to rich planters and enslaved mothers. Lacking Dickson's personal papers, Leslie cannot begin to understand Dickson's inner life, but Leslie brings every other possible sort of source material to bear. She marshals social history, family oral tradition, and evidence from newspapers, censuses, diaries, and courts to build a historical edifice around Dickson that situates her in her times and places and includes a room in which

prominent historians (e.g., Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Steven Stowe) can be taken to task for repeating myths flattering to the white plantation elite. Leslie shows that Dickson was not unique, but her unusual wealth made it possible for a historian to follow her particular life relatively closely.

Amanda America Dickson, conceived as a result of her forty-year-old white father's rape of her thirteen-year-old enslaved mother, became the pet of her white grandmother and her father. Though legally enslaved, Dickson received a lady's upbringing, including beautiful dresses, lessons on good manners, cultivated speech, and playing the piano. Everyone on the Dickson plantation in Hancock County, Georgia, called her "Miss Mandy."

Amanda's mother Julia was David Dickson's housekeeper until he married a twenty-five-year-old white woman when he was sixty-two. At that point, Julia and Amanda moved to a very nice house three hundred yards from the big house. The awkward legal Dickson union ended with the white wife's death in 1873, two years after the marriage. She had spent much of her time as a married woman back in Sparta with her parents, in whose house she died.

Amanda first married her father's white nephew, the twenty-nine-year-old Confederate veteran Charles H. Eubanks. They had two sons, the marriage ended, and she moved back in with her father, who doted on his grandchildren. When she was twenty-seven, she attended Atlanta University for two years. She did not stay on to graduate because she disliked the college's close discipline. Again, she returned to her father's house.

Over the years, the local (male) *crème de la crème* frequented the Dickson household, despite David's open affection for Amanda and her sons, whom he recognized as his beloved daughter and grandsons. Still one of the wealthiest farmers in the vicinity and a pillar of the Hancock County Planters' Club, David Dickson died in 1885.

David left the bulk of his estate, valued at more than \$300,000, to his daughter Amanda. Not surprisingly, seventy-nine members of his white family immediately contested the will. After two court reviews, the will stood as valid. With her fortune safely in her possession, Amanda bought a mansion in Augusta, where she settled with her mother and sons.

Amanda Dickson lived a quiet life in Augusta, where she preferred private acts of charity to organized racial uplift. In 1892 she married a wealthy, light-skinned freedman, Nathan Toomer, who later became the father of the (reluctant) Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer. The constantly precarious state of Amanda's health during her marriage points toward a strained relationship. Indeed, a year after she had married, she died of "neurasthenia," a nineteenth-century disease of the well-to-do that resembled what is now termed Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—utter psychic and physical exhaustion.

Leslie speculates that the more tangible causes of Dickson's death were, first, anxiety over the folly of her married younger son, who had attempted to kidnap his fourteen-year-old stepsister, with whom he had fallen insanely in love; second, aggravation caused by a twenty-four-hour delay in the passage of her and Toomer's Pullman car in Columbia, South Carolina; and, third, the worsening racial climate of the time. Her wealth passed on to her husband, mother, and sons. One son inherited the Dickson plantation; the other divorced, moved to California, and passed for white. Julia Dickson died in 1914, leaving her grandson from her legal marriage 100 acres of land in Hancock County.

What does this saga tell us about the post-emancipation lives of Southern African Americans? First, of course, that family ties of affection crossed the color line, both ways, and such ties could convey wealth from whites to blacks. Second is the corroboration of a tendency that Adele Alexander notes in *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879*: The class of light-skinned, privileged African American women who were likely to enter liaisons with white men before the Civil War legally married men of color after the war. This was the case with Amanda Dickson, and her two sons both married light-skinned African Americans. Freedom not only allowed black Americans to make money and accumulate property, but it also made African American men competitive in a market for women that white men had dominated during the era of slavery.

Many of those post-war marriages proved exceptionally brittle, however. Marital disruption caused enormous pain, a fact which needs to be taken into account in biography, alongside the deterioration of the quality of public life for Southern African Americans. I suspect that daily doses of humiliation and economic marginalization inflicted psychological stress on every part of African American life, including the most intimate. In the future, historians of African Americans should be able to deal with their subjects not simply as units of race, class, and gender, but also as individuals who develop within family systems—which may be of any race or of mixed races—and recognize that the source of black people's main personal gratifications and frustrations lie much closer to home than to manifestations of white racism.