

Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing

Editor-in-Chief Noelle A. Baker

ISSN: 2167-1257 | DOI: [10.55520/6ZH06EW2](https://doi.org/10.55520/6ZH06EW2)

Volume 42, 2025-06-11, DOI: [10.55520/49RSWHQY](https://doi.org/10.55520/49RSWHQY)

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Her Truth and Service: Lucy Diggs Slowe in Her Own Words. By Lucy Diggs Slowe. Edited by Amy Yeboah Quarkume

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DOI: [10.55520/Z7EBNRAW](https://doi.org/10.55520/Z7EBNRAW)

Slowe, Lucy Diggs. *Her Truth and Service: Lucy Diggs Slowe in Her Own Words*. Edited by Amy Yeboah Quarkume. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0231212137. \$30.

Her Truth and Service: Lucy Diggs Slowe in Her Own Words, edited by Amy Yeboah Quarkume, introduces the reader to Slowe through her letters, speeches, and essays, as well as other pieces published about her or addressed to her. Many were published in African American media outlets or preserved in the collections of historically Black colleges and universities.

Born in 1883 in Berryville, Virginia, Slowe earned her bachelor of arts degree in English from Howard University, which she attended on a full scholarship. After graduation, she taught school in Baltimore, Maryland, and through attending summer sessions, earned her master's degree in English from Columbia University in 1908.

Lucy Diggs Slowe accomplished many "firsts." She was a cofounder of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first historically Black collegiate sorority. She was the first president of the National Association of College Women (NACW), an association for Black female college graduates; the first Black woman to serve as dean at an American university; and established and led the first junior high school for Black students in Washington, DC. Outside academia, Slowe was an accomplished tennis player and a two-time champion of the New York Cup, becoming the first African American woman to win a major title in any sport.

Historical accounts note that Slowe was a fierce advocate and leader in everything she did. Quarkume writes, “In most photographs, Slowe wears a serious, intense, or stern expression. However, in pictures at home with family and friends, she is often beaming with a smile from ear to ear” (233). Lucy Diggs Slowe, like all exceptional people, held exceptional dimension. Her life, while marked by her many accomplishments, contained uncertainties, struggles, questions, and hope. In a letter to her friend Mary P. Burrill, with whom she lived for many years, Slowe wrote, “There are too many of me for me to know each one . . . Which shall I listen to, above all?” (1).

Slowe’s positions often allowed her to speak out against injustice, and she was well acquainted with many other civil rights advocates, such as Howard Thurman, Sue Bailey Thurman, Mary McLeod Bethune, and W. E. B. Dubois. As seen throughout this book, Slowe often focused her efforts on creating more equal opportunity for African American women in higher education and throughout society. Although her historical footprint is most deeply felt in her advocacy in these fields, she was a central figure in many movements of the early twentieth century.

A unique study into Slowe’s life, the book uses Slowe’s writing to trace her life’s work through her own words. The aptly titled book acts as a biographical anthology, one that allows readers not only to read Slowe’s speeches, correspondence, essays, and other written works, but also to understand how they manifested at a particular moment in her life. The book connects Slowe’s story as constructed by historians with many of her important works across her lifetime. Quarkume takes on the task of sharing Slowe with readers by allowing Slowe’s words to speak for themselves, highlighting pivotal moments that shaped her character.

The writings reflect how deeply invested Slowe was in her communities and—despite many challenges—how she used her words to incite change for a more equitable future. Quarkume’s decision to divide the chapters thematically by specific issues and Slowe’s institutional positions aids the reader in capturing Slowe’s full message and how it developed over time. With the volume of Slowe’s speeches and other writings, this organization creates a smoother reading experience.

From early in her career as an educator through her final position at Howard University, Slowe continuously spoke and wrote for the organizations in which she was involved. She also often shared her thoughts and observations in letters to her colleagues, often dear friends. Slowe also received many letters from former students asking for advice, sending thanks, or congratulating her on her accomplishments. For this reason, *Her Truth and Service* offers deep insight into Slowe’s life and the reception of her work from multiple perspectives.

Although other studies of Lucy Diggs Slowe exist,¹ this collection is the first of its kind. While other studies about Slowe and other influential African American activists in academia follow more traditional formats, this book breaks new ground in both format and intention.

Quarkume constructs narratives by carefully arranging key works, occasionally adding her own interpretation of the issues Slowe faced. Following her life through seven chapters, readers can see the wide reach of Slowe’s activism. Quarkume meticulously threads sources from multiple archives, libraries, newspapers, and personal collections to provide a clear legacy of Slowe’s accomplishments. Quarkume’s

labor in doing so provides a rich collection of primary sources for future researchers, historians, and readers to follow.

Slowe's vision for Black women in the United States can be felt throughout every chapter of *Her Truth and Service*, as she often spoke publicly and with other activists about her ideas. Moreover, readers can clearly see her efforts to empower her students and other educators through her speeches and the events she organized for her colleagues to share their work. Slowe's care for her students manifested in her fierce dedication to providing them an elite education that would propel them into their futures. As Slowe noted, "No college is doing its duty by its present-day student body unless it adds to the traditional subjects that it offers, those specific subjects which fit the student for intelligent participation in the economic, political, and social life of her community" (46). Her investment in education prepared her students for their careers while cementing her position within her community and beyond.

Many of the selected works feel deeply intertwined with issues and challenges still occurring today, such as the threat to democracy posed by an executive branch with unchecked power, which Slowe addressed in a piece titled "Speech by Slowe to the Mu-So-Lit Club." The club, formally known as the Music, Social, and Literature Club, was a group of prominent educated Black men in Washington, DC. In speaking to the group on March 19, 1933, Slowe stated:

In the last two weeks America has gone from a representative form of government to a dictatorship . . . In spite of Americans' love for democracy, they have given to President Roosevelt unprecedented power without serious objection from any considerable group because the economic situation in our country demanded that somebody be given absolute authority. It is true that the authority granted to President Roosevelt can be taken from him when the electorate sees fit to do so, but to all intents and purposes America is now under the control of a dictator. (137)

In contrast, many pieces, such as "Letter by Hilda B. Davis," the last work in the book, provide a glimpse into how Slowe was a widely loved and devoted friend to many. Davis was a former student of Slowe and dean of women and professor of English—first at Shaw University and then at Talladega College. Davis wrote:

In all of my association with Dean Slowe I found her a strong, courageous, independent woman and a friend whose understanding and generous spirit of giving herself to advance others or a cause knew no bounds. I am sure that my life would be quite different if I had never met her. We, her associates on whom has been thrust the task of carrying on the work which she began, recognize the genius of this woman and the loss which our group has suffered in her passing. (256)

Although readers could have benefited from more fulsome descriptions of Slowe's correspondents and people mentioned in the letters, Quarkume's interpretation of Slowe's writings and biographical information adds to the narrative of Slowe's life. Although Slowe speaks through her writing, Quarkume provides critical insights into how these moments created lasting impact. While Slowe may have known her work would ripple throughout the lives of many, her legacy can only fully be realized by contextualizing it in

its entirety. Quarkume, without disrupting the flow of the primary sources, adds insight to the figure that we know as Lucy Diggs Slowe.

To follow Slowe's journey, Quarkume uses the book's chapters to guide readers through major themes of her life's work. Each chapter reflects a different aspect of Slowe's work, sometimes focusing on positions she occupied and at others showing how Slowe used her talents to advocate on specific issues. Chapter 1 introduces Slowe's writings and her organizational affiliations. Chapter 2 focuses on Slowe as a brilliant student and astute scholar; the chapter's writings show Slowe's desire to teach and her pursuit of quality education for all. Chapter 3 portrays Slowe's life as dean of women at Howard University. Chapter 4 highlights Slowe's work pursuing justice. In chapter 5, we see Slowe's dedication to training women to succeed in the modern world. Chapter 6 provides a glimpse into Slowe's battles with Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, who questioned Slowe's abilities, paid her less because she was a woman, and failed to consult with her on university matters.

The final chapter adds the thoughts of other noted activists and colleagues who thanked Slowe for her advocacy on multiple challenges that persisted within the United States. This chapter provides closure to the work Slowe undertook in her lifetime, and places her among fellow historical figures that fought for others in all aspects of life. Her insight into educational, gender, and social issues—among others—signaled her empathy for others. She voiced the concerns of millions of Americans and worked to provide them with opportunities to excel. The sincere correspondence of this final chapter not only adds to her credibility as an activist and professional, but as a friend as well.

Finally, not to mention the massive labor that Quarkume undertook to create this resource would be a disservice to her abilities. In compiling hundreds of letters, speeches, notes, articles, and more, Quarkume achieves multiple goals. First, and most visibly, she provides readers with an abundance of further reading and research relating to Slowe and her colleagues. Second, she attests to the great utility of primary sources in telling stories. Lastly, this book provides a deeply humanizing narrative that may otherwise be lost if told differently. Quarkume has selected passages that expand our understanding of Lucy Diggs Slowe, showing all aspects of her through her own words and the words of others.

Amy Yeboah Quarkume's innovative approach to sharing Lucy Diggs Slowe's accomplishments through Slowe's own writing is deeply rewarding and thought-provoking in new ways. While many biographies guide readers through major interpretation via the author's perspective, this book proves that the subject can enthrall us through her own words, if presented intentionally and thoughtfully. In allowing Slowe to lead this narrative, readers come to understand Slowe and to appreciate her legacy.

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1. See, e.g., Carroll L. Miller and Anne S. Pruitt-Logan, *Faithful to the Task at Hand: The Life of Lucy Diggs Slowe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), and Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *To Live More Abundantly: Black Collegiate Women, Howard University, and the Audacity of Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022). ↩