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Reading into Race: Unsettled Reading and the Performance of "Race"

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Julie Burton Swift

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Reading, "race," and the primary productive link between the two—performativity—are the subject of this dissertation. By reading the formative discourse of phrenology and ethnology, as well as nineteenth-century textbooks which teach reading, I suggest a context in which reading operates as an expressive framework for the problematics of "race." In considering selected works of Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Herman Melville, I examine the uses to which reading is put, not only to elaborate, but to perform "race." By looking at "unsettled" reading—breakdowns of reading, failures to read, readings that prove unaccountable to the text—I emphasize the unsettled and unsettling aspects of reading and readers, particularly with regard to race. For, these very disquietudes promise to be most revealing about the relationship of reading to "race." In these places, where the "seams" of reading show, "race" is revealed to be a constructed concept rather than the "natural" quality nineteenth-century ethnology claimed it to be.

This dissertation will strive to walk a middle road between the text-based concerns of more traditional reader-response critics, and the more recent work of reception theorists, in an attempt to prioritize acts of reading performed within the text as models of reading which operate on actual readers and reading communities. "Reading into Race" interrogates texts which

problematize reading/interpretation. By studying the forms this problematics takes, as well as the historical context in which it functions, the dissertation will suggest another way of reading reading that incorporates many of the textual concerns of reader-response criticism while uniting them with the historical context of reception theory, yet without focusing exclusively on reception by reading communities. Incorporating the notion of performativity will allow us to reconceptualize reading, not simply as a function of the text, nor solely as a set of strategies employed by discrete reading communities. Instead, my arguments recognize features of the texts that materialize "race" through reading strategies the texts model and challenge.

For those who grew alongside—Emma, Nate, Fiona, and Livi—
and for my dad, Richard Burton,
whose own life and work teach me
what it means to live determination.

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sentences with, “When I finish my dissertation . . .” for nearly a decade, never once doubted that I actually would, you are with me in everything I do and am. I thank you all.

Introduction

" . . . the whole argument in defence of slavery, becomes utterly worthless the moment the African is proved to be equally a man with the Anglo-Saxon. The temptation therefore, to read the Negro out of the human family is exceedingly strong . . . " —Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered" (1854)

In July of 1854, Frederick Douglass gave the commencement address at Western Reserve College in Hudson, Ohio. In that same year, Josiah Nott and George Gliddon published the polygenesis handbook, *Types of Mankind* (1854), which claims that Africans and Europeans form distinct and different species of humans. Douglass's speech at the college, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," examines the grounds of the polygenesis claim: namely, that the African-American is not human, or not equally human. A superb orator and cultural analyst, Douglass spoke feelingly and cogently about the developing field of ethnology and its claims to "scientific" neutrality:

> The evils most fostered by slavery and oppression, are precisely those which slaveholders and oppressors would transfer from their system to the inherent character of their victims. Thus the very crimes of slavery become slavery's best defence. By making the enslaved a character fit only for slavery, they excuse themselves for refusing to make the slave a freeman. A wholesale method of accomplishing this result, is to overthrow the instinctive consciousness of the common brotherhood of man. For, let it be once granted that the human race are of multitudinous origin, naturally different in their moral, physical, and intellectual capacities, and at once you make plausible a demand for classes, grades and conditions, for different methods of culture, different moral, political, and religious institutions, and a chance is left for slavery, as a necessary institution. The debates in Congress on the Nebraska Bill during the past winter will show how slaveholders have availed themselves of this doctrine in support of slaveholding. There is no doubt that Messrs. Nott, Glidden [sic], Morton, Smith, and Agassiz were duly consulted by our slavery propagating statesmen. (485)[1]

[1] Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered." 1854. *Racial Thought in America: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln.* Ed. Louis Ruchames. Amherst: U of Mass P, 1969. 478-92.

Douglass's analysis uncovers a process whereby scientific racism is first produced and then used as a rationale for slavery, but also as evidence for the accuracy of ethnology's claims. As Douglass suggests, the "rationale" scientific racism provided to proponents of slavery had tremendous use-value to the extent that scientific backing of slaveowners lent the illusion of truth to their insistence on African-American inferiority.

What is at issue here, which Douglass knew full well, is the production of knowledge—how knowledge is made, how knowledge and power interact and how powerful signifiers like "truth", "science," and "Nature" can radically transform the terrain of the questions under discussion. The above signifiers had become so saturated with meaning that to bring them into conversation was to bring a host of other associations and significances to bear. Ethnologists, whom Douglass called "pretenders to science," assert the veracity of their research under the heading of "Science" and claim to be discerning natural truths. Douglass, too, relies on an appeal to Nature to make his case:

> The horse bears [the Negro] on his back—admits his mastery and dominion. The barnyard fowl know his step, and flock around to receive their morning meal from his sable hand. The dog dances when he comes home, and whines piteously when he is absent. All these know that the Negro is a MAN. Now, presuming that what is evident to beast and to bird, cannot need elaborate argument to be made plain to men, I assume, with this brief statement, that the Negro is a man. (Ruchames 480; emphasis in original)

Douglass uses self-evidence as the grounds for his assertion that "the Negro is a MAN"—Nature, the animals, know and recognize humanity.

But apart from the scores of specific instances during the nineteenth-century when these signifiers are used, the larger issue of how they operate on the questions being studied is at play. How do such forceful signifiers transform the conversations in which they enter? How do such signifiers work within a network of related signifiers and practices to make structures or

frameworks of knowledge? How do these structures of knowledge operate? What forms of knowledge do they authorize or exclude? What kinds of intellectual inquiry are permitted or perceivable in a particular framing of knowledge? And, ultimately, how do expressive frameworks operate, not only to cast an inquiry in a particular direction, but to constitute the very grounds upon which inquiry is made, the very grounds of what constitutes knowledge and knowing?

Douglass's speech probes precisely into these questions of how knowledge is made, and the dynamic between power and knowledge. In the epigraph above, drawn from Douglass's speech at Western Reserve, Douglass speaks of the multiple—political, cultural, social, intellectual, even philosophical—exclusions of African-Americans as the "temptation . . . to *read* the Negro out of the human family" (Ruchames 484; my emphasis). Douglass's word choice and his framing of the issue of African-American exclusion as an activity of reading are not mere linguistic happenstance, but the isolation of reading as a powerful signifier in the conversation about "race." This constellation of the concepts of reading, "race," and power, point to the centrality of reading as a key expressive framework for the elaboration of "race" through ethnological discourse and nineteenth-century discussions of race more generally. Antebellum discourse uses the concept of reading in both its theoretical and practical contexts as a structure of "race," an observation which Douglass's speech highlights and complicates. Realizing that, for the Christian, the question of polygenesis revolves considerably around interpretation of the Bible, Douglass emphasizes that it is not only the specific content of the Bible that is at stake but the status of the Bible as "sacred Book" and as "record of the early history of mankind" (Ruchames 483). Thus, Douglass's speech underscores the importance of reading and interpretation as well as the status of books as material and cultural objects in the nineteenth-

century. Moreover, Douglass draws attention to the "bearing of the question," the stakes involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge(s).

Reading, "race," and the primary productive link between the two—performativity—are the subject of this dissertation. By reading the formative discourse of phrenology and ethnology, as well as nineteenth-century textbooks which teach reading, I will begin to suggest a context in which reading operates as an expressive framework for the problematics of "race." In considering selected works of Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Herman Melville, I will examine the uses to which reading is put, not only to elaborate, but to perform "race." I want to suggest the indivisibility of "race" and reading in antebellum discourse and uncover the ways that reading and "race" each represent highly contested sites of social, political, and cultural disruption. By looking at "unsettled" reading—breakdowns of reading, failures to read, readings that prove unaccountable to the text—I emphasize the unsettled and unsettling aspects of reading and readers, particularly with regard to race. For, these very disquietudes promise to be most revealing about the relationship of reading to "race." In these places, where the "seams" of reading show, "race" is revealed to be an unstable concept rather than the "natural" quality nineteenth-century ethnology claimed it to be.

The particular, historical form(s) of "race" produced in America from the colonial timeframe through the Civil War, relied on the work of multiple theorists of race, working from perspectives more or less scientific and from postures more or less interested. Consequently, modern scholars of "race" can explore the concept through any of a number of different critical stances useful in understanding how "race" works. The avenue of inquiry pursued determines, in large part, the destination achieved. With this recognition fully in mind, I argue that reading must be foregrounded in our examination of "race." To allow reading to slip into the

background of such discussions, to allow reading to remain unexamined, and its constitutive role in the structure of "race" to go unremarked, is to continue to remain enthralled to its ability to authorize naturalized productions of "race." Yet, by reading into "race," not only in the real-life interactions of historically-situated persons, but also in the discourse which theorized "race," we can begin to appreciate the structure of "race" as a cultural product, largely influenced by the print technologies of the antebellum era and the supercharged notion of literacy.

Methodology: Reading and History

Despite its unexamined status in most popular usage, and, indeed, even in most educational contexts, the term and practice of reading is an historically-dependent and culturally-specific concept.[2] Like most forms of knowledge production, reading creates the illusion of permanence and fixity, as if, to say "reading" is to mean precisely the same thing in each cultural and historical moment. Yet, to study "reading" in antebellum America is to examine a practice which has a history beginning long before the timeframe under discussion and continuing long

[2] Historians have pursued, over the years, multiple approaches to studying literacy: researching educational institutions (Cremin and Bailyn), estimating the extent of literacy (Monaghan), writing the "history of the book" by examining what was read, particularly by ordinary readers (Darnton, Gilmore, and Armory), and most recently, studying the history of audience reception. The following is a brief selection of texts from these approaches. My own work relies mostly on "history of the book" scholarship. See B. Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities.* (Chapel Hill, NC: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1960); L. A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); --. *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); --. *American education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy instruction and gender in colonial New England." *Reading in America: Literature and social history* Ed. Cathy Davidson. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). 53-80; Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?" *Reading in America* Ed. Davidson 27-52; William Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989); see, especially, Amory, H., & Hall, D.D., eds. *A History of the Book in America. Vol. 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World.* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press & The American Antiquarian Society, 2000); Robert Gross and Mary Kelley, eds. *A History of the Book in America.* Vol. 2: *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010); Scott Casper, Jeffrey Groves, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds. *A History of the Book in America. Vol. 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).

after, up to this very day and beyond. What the nineteenth century meant by "reading" had much to do with the print technology and distribution available at the time, the democratizing impulse of Jacksonian era politics, the development of the common school, and the cultural values reading promoted and represented.[3] Thus, the meaning(s) of a term like "reading" is dependent on various kinds of technological, political, economic, and cultural factors. Nor does its meaning(s) remain stable or constant as these factors shift. Moreover, in addition to its more practice-based meanings, the term "reading" operates on a conceptual level, as well. "Reading" indicates not only the process whereby written texts are decoded, but also the sum significance of cultural attitudes toward literacy (itself an historically specific term and anachronistic to the early nineteenth century) and education. When we investigate "reading," we must accept the complexity of the term and its inter-related and overlapping meanings. Therefore, analysis of reading in antebellum America must necessarily involve some unraveling of reading's intricate network of meanings and functions.

We should consider specifically: the act of reading itself (what, precisely, the act of reading was understood to be), the process of reading (how the act of reading was practiced), the instruction of reading (how reading was taught and for what purposes), and lastly, the function(s) of the concept of reading (how reading "worked" in a cultural sense). Such study would not

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[3] See Gross and Kelley, eds. *A History of the Book in America*. Vol. 2: *An Extensive Republic;* Casper, et. al., eds. *A History of the Book in America. Vol. 3: The Industrial Book*. For information on improvements in technology: see, Michael Winship, "Manufacturing and Book Production." *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book* Eds. Casper, et al.; Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007); Ronald Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*. Ed. Cathy Davidson. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 180-200; for the spread of print and print culture: see, John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States: The Creation of an Industry, 1630-1865* vol. 1 (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Phila.: U of Pennsylvania P, 1959); for the growth of literacy: see, Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981) 58-88; Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic P, 1979). xiv-17.

exhaust all of the possible, or, indeed, relevant meanings of "reading," nor would it begin to address the concept of the reader or the historicity of individual, actual readers. Additionally, we must keep in mind the artificiality of separating out these related meanings and practices from each other. Part of reading's efficacy as a cultural concept, in addition to its function as an intellectual act, is owing to this web of meanings and practices. To try to divorce them from each other, even for the sake of analysis, is, at best, artificial, and, at worst, distorting. Yet, despite the difficulties posed by analysis, following (at least) these four avenues of inquiry will repay our efforts. By examining what "reading" is and does in nineteenth century America, we can begin to uncover its operation in the representative framework of "race" and its role in "race's" naturalization. "Reading" was used to figure "race." Exactly how it did so and why it did so are the questions which motivate this dissertation.

In the pages of this dissertation, I have tried to incorporate as many of the above analytics of reading as possible, yet in each of the chapters, certain concerns rise to the top and others settle into the background. For instance, my argument in chapter one is that reading formed a structure for the representation and performance of "race." Here I try to examine how the concept of reading worked to naturalize the notion of "race" produced by phrenological and ethnological discourse. To do this, I foreground certain assumptions about the ways discourse operates in a culture and, most consequently, about the ways we, as critics, gain access to the consequences of that discourse. That is, how do we gather and evaluate evidence of how discourse works in a particular historical context? What counts as evidence and what methodologies do we use to interpret what we find? Here, I read the operation of the concepts of "race" and "reading" from the discourse itself. I look, not so much at the reactions of historically-situated, individual readers, (whose reading performances are largely impossible to

recoup through the distance of time), but at the formal properties of published and unpublished letters, phrenological tracts, and ethnological texts to uncover both what they say about reading and race and at the unarticulated, but structuring notions of reading and race which propel the articulated concepts of the texts. In so doing, I interpret the ways the texts themselves produce a notion of the reader, similar to Wolfgang Iser's formulation of the "implied reader."[4] My uncovering of the reader[5] embedded within a text is crucial to the ways I interpret and describe the operation of this discourse, both for what this analysis includes and for what it leaves out.

History itself and the notion of historicism with regard to reading as described and practiced by reception theorists James Machor, Steven Mailloux, Stephen Railton, Philip Goldstein, and Janice Radway, among others, has been crucial to this study. Reception theorists work to study readers and reading from an historical perspective and focus on the effects of texts for reading communities. Their work is informed by the recognition that reading is not a stable process, but one that develops over time in specific ways, and one, moreover, that is ideologically informed. Steven Mailloux points to the importance of historical context in

[4] See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974). Iser's notion of the implied reader varies from the concept of an ideal reader in that it focuses less on a hypothetical reader derived from features of the text and more on the features themselves to isolate the "structure of effects" which produces an implied reader. The implied reader is produced as a function of the text.

[5] Reader-response criticism has been rightly critiqued for a totalizing, yet limited notion of "the" reader. Early reader-response critics often turned to the text itself to examine the act of reading, rather than to the experiences of actual readers. Within the text, they found constructions of a hypothetical reader whose process was determined largely through textual cues. The hypothetical reader implicit in much literary criticism is sometimes called the ideal reader. Reader-response critics sought to replace this unexamined notion of the ideal reader with a more thoughtful one. Among the multiple formulations of a hypothetical reader by various reader-response theorists are Iser's "implied reader," Stanley Fish's "informed reader," and Jonathan Culler's "competent" reader. Each of these formulations refer to a hypothetical reader, a textual construct, not an embodied actual reader. In embracing the useful analytical concept of a hypothetical reader, reader-response critics have sometimes fallen prey to a dangerous reductivism in their work. That is, they come to rely too heavily on the textual features of the text under discussion (including its "ideal reader") and neglect to consider the historical acts of reading by actual readers and also the degree to which the very practice of reading is itself historically-determined. This double flattening of reading to the complete or virtual exclusion of historical context is a valid critique of reader-response criticism. I have tried to avoid this reductivism by keeping the historical context in play in my analyses. See Iser, *The Implied Reader*, Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1972).; and Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975).

reconstructing the ideological underpinnings which structure any act of reading: "When we focus only on the text, an author's intention, or the reader's interpretive conventions . . . there is a strong tendency to view interpretation as a private reading experience involving only an independent text (and author) and an individual reader. Many foundationalist theories give in to this temptation and compound the mistake by completely ignoring the sociopolitical context in which interpretation takes place" (50).[6] Mailloux asserts the ideological significance of acts of interpretation: "interpretation functions repeatedly as a politically interested act of persuasion" (50).

Given the persuasive, politically consequential effects of reading, this dissertation will strive to walk a middle road between the text-based concerns of more traditional reader-response critics, and the more recent work of reception theorists, in an attempt to prioritize acts of reading performed within the text as models of reading which operate on actual readers and reading communities. This path cannot be realized, however, without a significant awareness of historical context and response from historically-situated readers. For example, one such productive revision is James Machor's refinement of Wolfgang Iser's now classic reader-response tenet: the reader as a function of the text. Machor speaks, instead, of the reader as a strategy of the text: "Since the reader's role always depends upon interpretation, reader-response criticism, in dealing with the dynamics of response, needs to stop talking about the implied reader as a function of the text and to begin looking at the way a specific set of interpretive strategies ascribes to a text functions, directions, and values that serve as the basis for attendant inferences about the reader's role. Doing so would not cashier the concept of the implied reader

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[6] Stephen Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998).

but would redefine that textual strategy as a heuristic of interpretive practice. Approaching the dynamics of reading as a historically constituted activity thus would mean examining the ways particular interpretive communities conceptualize the implied reader of particular texts and their reasons for doing so" (Machor 346-47).[7] In other words, we need to look to the interpretive conventions of specific reading communities, like, for instance, literary critics, or as Machor's examines, nineteenth-century literary reviewers, in order to discern the interpretations that get promoted as features of the text. Machor asks us to acknowledge the constructedness of "the text itself," and to realize that there is no valid appeal to a neutral, primary text independent of reader's readings. Machor's insight, by definition, argues for the applicability of a text's historical reception, but it also begs us to take his thoughtful argument further. This dissertation focuses on texts which problematize reading/interpretation. By studying the forms this problematics takes, as well as the historical context in which it functions, the dissertation will suggest another way of reading reading that incorporates many of the textual concerns of reader-response criticism while uniting them with the historical context of reception theory, yet without focusing exclusively on the reception of reading communities. Incorporating the notion of performativity will allow us to reconceptualize reading, not simply as a function of the text, nor solely as a set of strategies employed by discrete reading communities. Instead, my arguments recognize features of the texts that materialize "race" through reading strategies the texts model and challenge.

In important ways, reading is not only informed by, but produced within an historical moment. Chapter one will examine the practice of reading in antebellum schools and the process of reading taught through nineteenth-century textbooks. Chapter two considers the reactions of

[7] James Machor, "Fiction and Informed Reading in Early Nineteenth-Century America." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47.3 (Dec. 1992): 320-48.

actual readers of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as read through the novel's reviews in nineteenth-century literary magazines and also examines the text with regard to contemporaneous events, such as the Nat Turner rebellion, to understand the context in which Poe composed and his readers read *Pym*. Chapter three and the conclusion each consider texts with substantial, inescapable groundings in history. Chapter three looks at Frederick Douglass's autobiographies and Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative. Because these narratives offer accounts of historical events at the same time they revise historical happenings by writing them into literary forms, they pose particularly ripe areas of consideration for examining reading and "race" in historical context. The conclusion focuses on Melville's *Benito Cereno*, a text based on Amasa Delano's *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817). Melville revises this source text in consequential ways varying the historical account for his own purposes. In each of my text-based analyses I have tried to incorporate a sense of context, the degree to which a text itself and all of the functions/strategies we read through texts—author, reader, genre—are constructed in and through their moment in history. By reading a range of discourses—periodicals, phrenological marketing tracts, "scientific" papers, letters, and literary texts—I examine instances of this context, fully aware that it is not possible to recreate the sum total context in which this discourse originally functioned. Nonetheless, situating the antebellum texts discussed in this dissertation into, however partial, an historical context has been important to me and to the concepts of reading and "race" I study and hope to articulate.

Essential to my notion of reading and readers is the view of readers and the reading they engage in largely as constructs of an historically-situated and informed text. That is, I concede a great deal of the process and practice of reading to the text itself, and to discourse more generally, as apart from the conscious activity of a reading subject, however described. Yet, I do

not regard reading as entirely a textual product, or the product of an historically-specific discourse which constructs the reading subject. The embodiment of reading in actual, time-bound, physical human bodies should not be downplayed. However variously the process of reading is conceived or activated in different moments of history, it occurs through a human body, which is not to say that this body itself is not also conceived through historically-variant discourse. The intersection of the text and the activation of reading within the body, I would argue, is the space of performance. The notion of the "performative" articulated by J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* (1955) and reanimated by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work, particularly, *Touching Feeling* (2003), influence and shape the ways I view reading, race and the bodies that *do* reading and "race" in their particular, historical moments.[8]

The notion of performativity employed by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and others to interrogate the dynamics of gender and sexuality is a potent concept because it offers a way of theorizing bodies as they engage in acts which establish the major parameters by which we mark identity, such as gender and sexuality, but also race, class, ableness, and age, as well. The concept of the performative is useful in this study because it creates a bridge between the concepts of reading that operate within a culture and the actual bodies which engage in the act of reading. By studying the forms of reading in nineteenth century discourse, we can uncover reading's role in the performance of "race." In other words, we can examine how reading contributes to the materialization in the body of a particular set of practices, beliefs, and

[8] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. 1955. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

assertions, known collectively as "race." "Race" is a performative, materializing its consequences in the moment of its doing.

It is worth noting here the distinction between the concept of performativity employed in this project and the notion of performance, more generally. The performative is, as Butler details, both dramatic and non-referential, meaning that it is not language which simply describes, but language that acts. In the context of bodies that perform language acts, the theory of "performativity" broadens the concept of the performative to uncover the ways signs, even non-linguistics signs like, gesture, movement, bodies themselves, materialize and *perform* aspects of ideology and culture in the process of being or doing. This notion is substantially different from a concept of performance as theatricality or dramaticism. In theatrical contexts, performance is seen as a representation in time of a particular character, scene, or dialogue, but it is primarily understood as a fictional representation. Performativity, on the other hand, is precisely not an act that can be described as a representation. Instead, the performative constitutes in the moment of performance. Bodies materialize ideology as aspects of the self, often in the form of those features of identity we think of as "natural," like gender, sexuality, and race. Theatricality and dramatic play involve conscious imitation, the wearing of a literal or figurative "mask." The theory of performativity, in contrast, insists that the mask is us, that identity is "tenuously constituted in time," "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler).[9] The distinction between the theory of performativity and the commonsense concept of performance is crucial then to the recognition of the materialization of ideology in particular cultural forms, whether those forms are bodies themselves or the categories we use to compose identity. In this dissertation, I will examine scenes in texts like, for instance, the shaving scene

[9] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988) : 519-31.

from Melville's *Benito Cereno*, that include theatricality, but I want to maintain the conceptual difference between performativity and theatricality. Though a performative may partake of theatricality, to uncover ideology's constitutive function, we cannot collapse the two.

"Race"

The early nineteenth century produced a substantial discourse elaborating the concept of "race." Particularly in the slaveholding South, "race" was a term whose popular and theoretic meanings were in flux. The earlier discourse tends toward an understanding of "race" as type. As the century progresses, a more "scientific" vision of "race" replaces the earlier view and spurs a new kind of racism "sanctioned" by "science." Researchers like Samuel George Morton, Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, and Louis Agassiz formed what became known as the "American School" of Ethnology. They argued that dark-skinned peoples were biologically inferior to light-skinned people and constituted a separate species, the result of a distinct creation. Moreover, their blackness indicated their intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and cultural degeneration. "Blackness" and "whiteness" were constructed as antithetical, often relying on a Biblical justification. Much of this theorizing about "race" is produced in response to a social and cultural need to justify in some way the increasingly strained system of chattel slavery. With the South's economic engine fueled by slavery, the monetary consequences of abolition would be great. Economic motives surely contributed to the increasing dogmatism of racial theories as the century progressed, but the growing popularity of the abolition movement, an increase in slave insurrection and abolitionist activity, and increases in runaways, created a moral and ethical imperative to justify slavery, as well. Cultural and popular notions of "race" substantially

influence the "science" of "race" that gets produced during the nineteenth century. The "science," in turn, influences popular concepts of "race" and racial difference.

Because nineteenth-century race theory operated through the polarization of white and black, I'm going to limit my investigation of "race" in this dissertation to "whiteness" and "blackness." These two opposing categories play off of one another and interact in the space of reading. The methodological decision to limit the terms of analysis to "blackness" and "whiteness" risks reinforcing the boundaries between the perceived categories, or at least, continuing to define and analyze literature produced by African-American and European-American authors within the limited parameters of blackness and whiteness can contribute to the persistence of these categories. Nonetheless, this is the analytical path I will choose precisely because of the codifiying effects of "race" on reading practices. For instance, in *To Wake the Nations* (1993), Eric Sundquist illustrates that only certain, authorized visions of "race" are visible, or, I would suggest, readable, because readers do not read with strategies beyond their own, culturally-derived ways of knowing. "[R]eaders and literary critics," Sundquist writes, " . . . are likely to misperceive and misunderstand the signs generated by another cultural tradition when they force unfamiliar signs into familiar and hence potentially inappropriate paradigms drawn from their own experience; or when they ignore features that seem inconsequential, perhaps even antagonistic or nonsensical, to them" (6).[10] Thus, readers may not only misconstrue texts from outside their own cultural tradition, such as across racial lines, but they may fail to register unfamiliar signs altogether.

Toni Morrison, on the other hand, takes a slightly different tack in insisting on the crucial centrality of blackness to the white, literary imagination. In *Playing in the Dark* (1993), she

[10] Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. (Cambridge: Belknap P, 1993).

demonstrates how blackness, or "Africanism," serves as a cultural receptacle for white fears: "The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this" (Morrison 17; italics in original).[11] The invisibility Sundquist details, Morrison would argue, is a fiction supporting a white "master narrative" of Americanness:

> Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. . . . Even, and especially, when American texts are not "about" Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. . . . As a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients, this Africanist presence may be something the United States cannot do without. Deep within the word "American" is its association with race. . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen. (46-47)[12]

For Morrison, then, Africanism is constitutive to the American textual self. We cannot read, without reading in black and white, without witnessing the unacknowledged shaping influence of "race."

Thus far, I have used the term "race" without making explicit my own understanding of its meaning. There is no biological basis for racial distinction. As such, when talking about "race," we are really talking about the development of an idea through history which has had profoundly real and tragic effects on the lives of some people, while producing equally real and beneficial effects on the lives of others. Racial difference is only made to appear "natural." This paper argues that reading functioned in such a way as to participate in this process of making

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[11] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

[12] Ibid.

"race" seem natural—biologically-based and indicative of essential characteristics. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes the function of "race" well when he calls it a "dangerous trope" used for social, political, and economic purposes (5).[13] Gates's description of "race" as a trope calls attention to the textual production of "race," yet we must also remain alert to "race's" effects in people's lives. Melissa Nobles explains it succinctly when she says: "race is not something that language simply describes, it is something that is created through language and institutional practices. As a discourse, race creates and organizes human differences in politically consequential ways" (12).[14] I have placed "race" within quotation marks thus far in this introduction to indicate the tenuous nature of the concept and the degree to which "race" is produced through behavior and practice, as much as through ideas or beliefs. Simply because reading the repetition of quotation marks becomes tiresome for a longer project, I will forgo their use throughout the paper, but I will retain the contingency of the concept and the awareness of race's production in the moment of use.

Unsettled Reading

My focus on "unsettled reading" in antebellum texts is meant to probe depictions of failed or unsettling communication between author and reader or failed/unsettling interpretation between reader and text. The phrase signifies the disturbing consequences of reading when the

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[13] Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." *"Race," Writing, and Difference.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986).

[14] Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000).

topic is "race," but also points to the critical imperative of recognizing the historically-dependent forms that reading takes. Reading itself is unsettled, unstable, contingent, in-process.

As a concept, reading is also powerfully resonant in antebellum culture. Reading operates in more ways than it would seem in the vision of reading as quiet, solitary exchange between reader and book.[15] Reading functions as a framework of race. On a connotative level, reading was tied to the concept of literacy in all its progressive, nation-building significance and, therefore, conferred a powerful authority on written texts and their ability to transform and educate a nation. The notion of reading worked in a palpable way—suggesting socioeconomic and cultural advancement at the same time it conveyed the authority of Western learning. It became an extraordinarily expressive tool for authors looking to translate obscure concepts into a popular vocabulary. Not only did the concept of reading offer such a vocabulary, but it also offered an unique combination of attributes. Readings's simultaneously familiar and yet, rarified, form, provided an ideal pattern in which to construct new knowledges. Few expressive tropes could compare to reading's ability to be both familiar to a widespread audience and also occupy a highly respected space of cultural authority.

Reading racial or cultural difference is fraught with difficulty because readers must learn to read by a new standard, must learn to recognize as significant different textual signs. Readers must alter their received "rules of notice," to use Peter Rabinowitz's explanatory phrase, that

[15] Louis Althusser's insight in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that some institutions like the family, religion, and education are made to seem private or non-ideological in order to conceal the pervasiveness of ideology and state power is applicable to the concept of reading, as well (144). Reading, therefore, is not so much a denizen of either the public or private domains, but is instead a form of ideological recognition that serves to convince readers of their own autonomy. Althusser explains: "you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. The writing I am currently executing and the reading you are currently performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition" (172-73). See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review P, 1971. 127-86.

generic and conventional code by which readers know which aspects of a text should be noted, and which can be ignored.[16] Reading is not done in a vacuum of value. Reading always remains informed by the reading strategies a culture or particular interpretive community teaches. In "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," Patrocinio Schweickart argues that an "androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretive strategies," that women are, essentially, trained to identify with male characters, male plots, male viewpoints in the course of reading canonized, masculinist texts (45).[17] In other words, women are taught to read as men. Toni Morrison makes a similar point when she contends that African-American readers undergo a similar oppression in being trained to read from the white perspective (xii).[18] As Schweickart demonstrates with regard to gender and Morrison applies to race, readers read as they are taught to read. The "rules of notice," are derived from assumptions about what is valuable, worthwhile, essential. "Value," "worth," and "essence" are not fixed categories, but ones that are, as Michel Foucault would assert, actively and culturally produced. In this way, reading is inescapably a manifestation of ideology. Yet reading's action with regard to ideology is not as circumscribed as it may seem. Reading can operate to reinforce dominant ideologies or it can be used to resist or forge alternate ideologies.

I will use the term "reading" in at least three ways. First, I'll use "reading" as a verb to refer to the process of scanning to make sense of written and non-written texts. I want to place emphasis on the experiential quality of this practice. That is, in this context, I want to think

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[16] See Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987).

[17] Patricinio Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading." *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Eds. Elizabeth Flynn and Patricinio Schweickart. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 31-62.

[18] Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

about reading as an experience in time.[19] Paul de Man and Stanley Fish have likewise argued for an understanding of reading as experience. Both oppose theories of reading which focus solely on the interpretation produced, but ignore the *process* of reading. De Man critiques reader-response critics for, he claims, the intent to "do away with reading altogether" by reducing reading to a "means toward an end" (qtd. in Bennett 4).[20] Fish avoids such criticism by emphasizing reading as a process. In "Literature in the Reader," he is concerned with "slowing down" the process of reading and claims that the sentence "is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader" (Fish 72; italics in original).[21] Fish's emphasis on reading as an event in which the reader participates is germane to my study. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), Douglass points to experience as central to successful reading. While describing the many misinterpretations of slave songs by white Northerners, Douglass declares that if one wants to understand "the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul" (37-38).[22] Long before Fish, Douglass insisted upon "slowing down" the process of reading, of analyzing the sounds of song alone and in silence. Moreover, Douglass highlights the bodiliness of reading.

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[19] I want to distinguish my use of "reading as experience" from theories of reading that rely on authorizing personal experience as a requirement for comprehension. In such theories, the term "reading" becomes synonymous with "interpretation." This is precisely the limited usage of the word "reading" that I resist. My use of "experience" is to express the dynamic activity of reading as an experience that unfolds in time. Reading itself is the experience.

[20] Andrew Bennett, *Readers and Reading* (New York: Longman, 1995).

[21] Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism.* Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1980) 70-100.

[22] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* 1845. *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader.* Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Oxford UP. 21-98.

One must take one's body to the woods and allow sounds to pass through it in order to understand their meaning.

Second, "reading" will refer to the end product of such an experience, an interpretation gleaned from a text, written or non-written. And third, "reading" will be used to signify the textual quality of this process and ultimate interpretation. The texts under examination here insist on this textual nature. In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for instance, the "love" letters Dr. Flint sends Linda serve as a kind of substitute for his body. By refusing to read Dr. Flint's letters, Linda refuses not only his sexual advances, but the penetration of his words into her mind. Bodies and letters are doubled here, as they are when Linda postmarks letters from New York City to convince Dr. Flint that her body has escaped to freedom in the North. In many ways, Jacobs, Poe, Douglass, and Melville, pose reading as a problem of hermeneutics. Though the "texts" that fill the pages of these literary texts are not exclusively print-based, like, for instance, the slave-songs Douglass writes about or the deceptive performance of slave docility Melville describes in *Benito Cereno*, the interpretive strategies characters perform emphasize and reinforce reading as the operative principle in these depictions. Hence, my interest, ultimately, is less in what specific forms of textuality appear in the selected literature, and more in what strategies of reading those texts enact, however imagined.

What these authors share is a common insistence on the reader's importance, not only to the circulation and consumption of literature and print culture, but to ideological formation and politics. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* suggests the powerful role reading can play as a strategy of subjectivity and agency. It reacts against the threat it perceives in the black reader by performing race as essential, fearful, and divisive, effectively closing down reading

and its liberating possibilities in the process. Douglass, on the other hand, forges a style of reading that announces itself as political, active, and masculine. Jacobs comes up against the limits of sympathetic identification in her text, striving toward a mode of reading that gathers its force from an authorizing experience and communal engagement. Nonetheless, reading, for Jacobs, is depicted as unsettled, as failure, when that reading attempts identification across racial and class divisions. In *Benito Cereno,* Melville disputes the notion of an "outside" to discourse, implying a political economy produced and regulated discursively. Yet, if Melville finds his own expression circumscribed, such as when he wrote to Hawthorne in 1851, "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches,"[23] in *Benito Cereno* he suggests a form of performative reading which may offer other possibilities. In each of these texts, the activation of the reader is central. In *Coming to Words* (1986), Gary Lindberg writes about the sometimes stultifying effects of academic reading strategies: "Despite the elaborate systems of analysis that characterize academic reading, literary works are not repositories of hidden meanings but human gestures. They record someone's attempt to come to words. And to read them is not to be given an interpretation of experience but to witness one in the making" (144).[24] To keep in mind the immediacy, the performativity of reading is crucial to unraveling the operation of reading in these texts and to understanding how and why the nineteenth-century posed the problem of racial difference as a problem of reading.

[23] See "Melville's letter to Hawthorne, June 1851." *Melville's Life and Works* July 25 2000. Web. 19 November 2010.

[24] Gary Lindberg, "Coming to Words: Writing as Process and the Reading of Literature" *Only Connect* Ed. Thomas Newkirk (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1986) 143-57.

I want to highlight the flexibility of the term "reading" and point to this pliancy as one of the key strengths of examining literary texts under this rubric. Keeping each of the multiple valences at play in my analysis will yield richer results. For in acknowledging the complications posed by the mere definition of "reading," I can begin to contemplate and complicate the variety of effects reading has on readers, writers, and discourse. In my own work, I want to avoid a "flattening" of reading, viewing it singularly as an end-product of interpretation, or as a process requiring a particular, essentialist identity, however that identity might be defined. I see identity in more fluid terms and recognize its production in the act of reading. Considering identity as a function of reading underscores the political significance of the question of reading, of how much is at stake in every act of reading. I hope this dissertation will contribute to the theorization of and recognition for the ongoing need for fuller accounts of reading, in all of its significances.

The practice of reading and readers themselves are informed by multiple factors, including those which determine subject positioning, like gender, race, class, age, health status, and relation to history, and those which establish a reader's relationship to the text she reads, like narrative conventions, literacy levels, and print technologies. Reading is a dynamic interchange between text and reader, but it is not necessarily the same interchange every time a reader picks up a text, nor is this interchange transferable in all its specificity between different readers. In the 1980s, reader-response-informed, feminist critics like Mary Jacobus and Diana Fuss were among the first to challenge theories of reading which rely exclusively on "experience" or essentialized notions of identity. In *Reading Woman* (1986), Jacobus derides concepts of reading that create a false sense of wholeness, that negate the divisions produced in the act of reading

along the lines of gender.[25] Similarly, Diana Fuss emphasized the many subject-positions any one reader embodies simultaneously. These varied subject-positions result in readings rife with "internal contradiction" and an ever-proliferating host of new subject-positions from which to read (Fuss 35).[26] "In reading," Fuss writes, "we bring (old) subject positions to the text at the same time the actual process of reading constructs (new) subject-positions for us" (33).

Critics of African-American literature faced similar theoretical challenges as they debated the role race plays in both the reading and interpretation of texts. Michael Awkward's *Negotiating Difference* (1995) summarized and critiqued the critical debate between African-American critics Joyce Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker over the function of black "experience" and political activism in the interpretations produced by the literary critic of African-American texts. Awkward points out that theories of reading which presuppose the "authority" of experience, make use of political categories of identity. Where a literary critic may describe the authority of women's experience, or African-American experience, he or she is not actually referring to the multitudinous events/behaviors/beliefs which must constitute the "experience" of large numbers of people, but rather to cultural participation as a member of a specific social "class" and to an ideology formed around a critique of white androcentrism. Reading, under this auspice then, is an "overtly political act," performed within specific interpretive communities in which "interpretation is a decidedly subjective and 'interested' act of ideological commitment" (Awkward 31).[27]

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[25] See Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

[26] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[27] Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995). For a brief, gendered critique of the critical exchange between male and female critics regarding the notions of experience and textuality in criticism of African-American literature, see Sharon Holland's "The Revolution, 'In Theory'" Rev. of *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism: The Hidden Costs of Being Black in*

Awkward's framing of the difficulties of reading and interpretation across the lines of race and gender, poise us to ask some of the very questions that seem at issue in the antebellum texts included in this dissertation. Is reading a process which forges identification and connection? Does reading build communities, however limited or contingent? Does reading reinforce, even inscribe difference? For Poe, Douglass, Jacobs, and Melville, these questions seem inseparable from the theorization of reading, which is also a theorization of communication with the Other, in effect, a theorization of race.

America, By Jody David Armour, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, By Lindon Barrett, *Race Men*, By Hazel V. Carby." *American Literary History* 12.1 and 2 (2000) : 327-336.

"A Small Drop of Ink": Reading and the Representation of Race

In *How to Read Character* (1874), Samuel R. Wells declares: "as is the brain, so is its bony casement, the cranium, on which may be read, in general forms and special elevations and depressions, and with unerring certainty, a correct outline of the intellectual and moral character of the man" (vi).[28] The main tenet of phrenology, that the "bumps," contours, and slope of the skull could be "read" by trained examiners, illustrates the fraught position of the human body in the equally fraught body politic of nineteenth century America. As Carolyn Sorisio explains in *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879*,[29] the simultaneous pressures of abolitionism, growing demands for women's rights, and the rise of science, "called attention to the specificity of the body and forced Americans to flesh out the implications of their Revolution and Constitution" (18). Under intense scrutiny, the body occupies public discourse in a new way and with new specificity. No longer the

[28] Samuel Roberts Wells, *How to Read Character. A New Illustrated Handbook of Phrenology and Physiognomy, For Students and Examiners, With a Descriptive Chart.* New York: S.R. Wells, 1874. Making of America Archive. University of Michigan. Web. 18 March 2010. Wells was a partner in Fowler and Wells, a New York-based publisher of phrenological textbooks and materials from 1846-1856. "Practical phrenologists" like Wells, or his better known partners, Orson S. Fowler and his brother, Lorenzo N. Fowler, promoted phrenology as a kind of self-help system. They told audiences that to "know thyself" was critical to self-improvement, the raising and management of children, even to career and financial planning. They published under titles emphasizing the accessibility of the science, like "Phrenology Made Easy" (1838), or its wide applicability, as in Orson Fowler's *Self-Culture and Perfection of Character Including the Management of Youth* (1847). The Fowler brothers maintained a New York City base of operations known as "The Phrenological Cabinet," which included a museum of human and animal skulls open to the public, a mail-order business, and a publishing house for phrenological tracts. Many of the Fowlers's publications, along with facsimiles of advertisements for The Phrenological Cabinet can be viewed at the American Social History Project's site, *The Lost Museum*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/lostmuseum/lm/91/>. See also, "Phrenology Made Easy." *Knickerbocker Magazine.* June 2, 1838. "The Lost Museum." American Social History Project. George Mason University. Web. 24 March 2010. and, Orson S. Fowler, *Self-Culture and Perfection of Character Including the Management of Youth.* 1847. "The Lost Museum." American Social History Project. George Mason University. Web. 24 March 2010.

[29] Carolyn Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833-1879* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002).

Enlightenment's featureless, unspecified form,[30] a raced, sexed body takes center stage in the antebellum era, provoking questions about its social and cultural meaning(s), and, most consequentially, its role in the political process.

Wells's text serves, not only to demonstrate nineteenth-century America's increased compulsion to locate identity in an essentialized body, but also to highlight a primary figuration in which the antebellum negotiation of corporeality and ideology is made manifest: reading.[31] As both a literacy practice and an interpretive concept, reading takes on an increased significance in the antebellum era. Literacy is at an all-time high among white males during this timeframe, and among girls and women, as well, contributing to the explosion of print matter, the rise of professional authorship, and the cultural importance of a shared literature in the formation of the country's sense of itself as a nation. In this climate of increased literacy and a rapidly expanding literary market, the concept of reading becomes laden with an abundance of cultural values, prescriptives, and possibilities that often remain unexamined, but, nonetheless, potently shape both the theorization of reading and its material practice. For instance, reading functions within antebellum discourse as a powerful signifier of progress, national identity, and material prosperity. Though these inferences may go unacknowledged, they inform the ways reading is conceived, taught, and practiced in everyday life.

In this chapter, I argue that, for antebellum America, the laden, layered concept of reading gives expression and form to the process whereby knowledge, and, therefore, power, is

[30] The concept of a "universal" man was a potent fiction of Revolutionary rhetoric which distracted from the fact that the Enlightenment "man" was not really a neutral concept, but, rather, white and male. See Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

[31] Though Wells's text dates from the 1870s, it serves as a convenient register of the degree to which reading was ultimately embraced as the explanatory structure of the notion of race developed in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s by the "American School" of Ethnology. Though it initially structures the notion of race developed in "scientific" discourse, reading ultimately becomes the framework for popularizing racialist thought in the writing of practical phrenologists, later in the century, as well.

first produced, and then, concealed. That is, conceptually, reading becomes a way of figuring and structuring the production of knowledge. In the case of nineteenth century phrenology and, later, ethnology, reading is theorized to evoke a derivative quality, to suggest that the act of reading is an uncomplicated interpretation of some divine or natural source "text." Yet, the view of reading as derivation is itself a production that conceals its own operation. Instead of showing itself and the mechanisms by which it operates, knowledge seems to flow from the revelation, that is, the *reading* of "natural" laws or truths. In this theorization of reading, the knowledge-making process is figured as derivative, as an objectivist reading of Nature. This objectivist notion of reading (as natural) is then marshaled to support the natural-ness of other theorizations, such as race. Consequently, the notion of reading produced within antebellum discourse works not only to denote, but to give form to, the new "knowledges" it elaborates. Reading serves the dual role of representing and structuring the notion of race produced within scientific discourse during the early nineteenth-century.[32]

Well's text illustrates this double function of reading in the production of race as a natural and essential category. Wells promises his audience the information needed to read, or interpret, the "intellectual and moral" characters of others solely by examining their heads. His text suggests, first, that this information *can* be read, or interpreted, by one knowledgeable in phrenology and, second, that one could be trained to recognize and collect the data necessary for

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[32] My discussion of the operation of reading as both representation and structure of race is an example of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call "racial formation." They explain that "racial processes" happen "through a linkage between structure and representation. Racial *projects* do the ideological 'work' of making these links. *A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize or redistribute resources along particular racial lines.* Racial projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning" (Omi and Winant 56; italics in original). We can view reading in antebellum American, then, in Omi and Winant's terms, as a racial project engaged in racial formation. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

interpretation. The "reading" alluded to in the title and preface, then, is both an act of interpretation and the product of this selfsame process. Yet, *How to Read Character* obfuscates its production of the interpretation and suggests, instead, that its "reading" of the skull is merely an articulation of a "natural" truth, that of racial difference: "Phrenology . . . consists in *judging from the head itself*, and from the body in connection with the head, what are the *natural* tendencies and capabilities of the individual" (Wells 1; my italics).

Though by the 1840s it had been discredited as a science, phrenology continued to influence popular notions of the mind and its relation to the body well into the century. As a product, such as it became for likes of Wells and his partners, the Fowler brothers, phrenology itself was still quite marketable in the 1870s and '80s, as Wells's text demonstrates. Most importantly, however, phrenology made a lasting imprint on the scientific world. In the study and collection of human skulls, phrenologists and interested researchers claimed to find characteristic differences between the skulls and, therefore, as phrenologists would have it, the mental capacities of, the races. The hierarchy they developed of human mental ability placed fair-skinned Caucasians at the top and people of color in various lower positions, usually ranking Asian peoples in the middle and Native Americans and Africans at the bottom. Though the interpretation of skulls themselves fell out of scientific favor, the notion of race as a natural, biological, and essential category only gained in influence. Phrenology helped to "legitimize" a biological basis for the concept of race, contributing tremendously to the scientific acceptance of the growing field of Ethnology and the development of what has become known as "scientific racism."

Phrenology claims to uncover a self-evident, "natural" text through the method of reading, yet this formulation is more ideological than natural. For, despite its contrary

theorization in the majority of antebellum discourse, reading is not a stable, ideologically-independent method of revealing natural truths, but a related set of practices and principles which are historically-dependent and deeply imbedded in ideological constructions. Thus, when Wells's text maintains that reading or "judging" the body as text is an objective derivation, it denies the historical construction of reading and opts, instead, for a depiction of reading as ahistorical and transparent. For Wells, the phrenologist merely describes the features of an unambiguous body/text, putting into language what he claims is already patently evident upon the body in the form of anatomical features. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that Wells's text does not perform a simple, objective reading of the body, but a performance of quite another kind.

Wells's text actually produces and performs the very features it claims to read, obscuring this production in the process by insisting that its readings are natural and unmediated. For example, when Wells writes that the Caucasian skull "indicates great intellectual power," and "strong moral or spiritual sentiments," or that "the animal feelings predominate over both the intellect and the moral sentiments" in "the negro cranium," he is speaking, not of individuals, but in the relatively new, "scientific" language of type[33] (vii). The concept of biological type helped

[33] The notion of biological type is largely the work of French scientist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832). Following in Linnaeus's classification system, Cuvier argued that genera and species were distinct structural groupings of organisms. Unlike others who claimed that the subcategories blended into one another, Cuvier maintained that divisions between the forms exemplified biological types. The types, he felt, held the key to unlocking the features of the entire category. Cuvier recognized three subspecies of humans: Caucasians, Mongolians, and Ethiopians. The subspecies could be broken down into additional categories based on physical features, geography, and language. What is remarkable about Cuvier's work is his indistinguishable use of the terms race and "variety." Because Cuvier elaborated a concept of race that incorporated the main tenets of the term "variety," notably that progeny of a particular stock repeat particular, recognizable characteristics through the generations, the notion of race took on the additional premise that differences in culture had their roots in biological, "racial," varietal differences. That is, Cuvier asserted that physical differences between the races caused cultural and mental differences between racial groups. What is more, Cuvier used the concept of biological type to talk about the races of humans without establishing a specific meaning or reference for the term. "Type" could refer to similar features between individuals at any unspecified taxonomic level. Though imprecision in the use of "type" posed major classificatory problems, its very imprecision allowed the term to operate in a way that indulged and satisfied a classificatory impulse without really resolving any of the issues of categorization. See Michael Banton, *Racial*

fuel the belief that humans could be divided into categories recognizable by external features and representative of internal characteristics, and, what is more, that these categories or types could explain and subsume the distinctiveness of individuals. Internal characteristics are declared to be discernable from the body itself: "The skulls of races and nations also differ widely in form, and these differences are found to correspond to known differences of character" (Wells vii). Here we can see the production of difference as a field of scientific inquiry, but also the production of physical difference as indicative of essential, racial, mental qualities. Differences of form get "read" by phrenologists who relate them to "*known* differences of character" (my italics). The circular logic, in which the character of the different "races" is "known" prior to the establishment of any physical difference, supports Wells's depiction of difference as natural, as existent prior to scientific investigation.

Yet in this very articulation, Wells' rhetoric also undoes the claims its purports to make. By insisting on the self-evident, essential, and natural racial body, Well's text subverts the need of phrenological reading. If racial "character" follows, without exception, from the raced body, and if this character is already "known," as Wells suggests, there is little need to "read" it on the individual body. Nonetheless, Wells' text does insist on the reading of racial difference; moreover, it frames the perception of difference as an act of reading. What we can uncover in these formulations, is a flattening of reading to eliminate, as much as possible, variation in interpretation. Under Well's direction, all readers will read the raced body in the same way, according to its "known . . . character." His text helps produce the "character" of the raced bodies he pretends to read, insisting falsely on the self-evidence of the "natural" body.

Theories (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 28-32. Despite the fact that Cuvier's use of "type" didn't explain the intricacies of racial difference, it did provide a language for discussing race that became widespread in the nineteenth century scientific community and that lent a "scientific" air to an otherwise haphazard concept.

Additionally, the text performs acts of reading on raced bodies, modeling this flattened process of reading in its performance. In Wells' text, the performance of reading becomes the discernment of difference.

I include this extended analysis of Wells' text because in it we can uncover many of the same formulations and practices of reading that are foundational to the concept of race contrived within much popular and scientific nineteenth-century discourse, where reading both represents and structures race. Wells' text denies variation in readers' interpretations and yet, simultaneously, retains the term, "reading." Thus, Wells' text can make use of the cultural resonances of literacy to legitimate his reading of the racial categories his text has helped produce. More importantly, reading forms the very structure of race within this text, for reading ultimately becomes exemplified by the discernment of difference. If reading functions to reveal difference, it ultimately becomes a way of expressing the dynamic at the core of racialism: race as difference. Reading, then, is elemental to the representation and structure of race. In a sense, reading becomes an act of race-ing. To expose reading, in this context, as an act of racialism, brings me to the final thrust of my argument in this chapter: that the concept of performativity offers us a way of reading reading as it structures race, to account for the cultural construction of the body in the performance of race.

In order to trace the role reading played in the construction of race in the antebellum period, we must first consider the multiple contexts in which racial discourse functioned, as both response and shaping mechanism. For instance, though racial discourse theorized reading, the discourse itself operated in a context where reading already had a history of signification and practice. The term "reading" brought a history to bear on the conversation of race, just as much as racial discourse influenced the meanings of reading. What were some of the social, political,

and cultural conditions that formed the matrix in which racial discourse was read? In addition to the institution of slavery itself, perhaps one critical context is the rapidly expanding and developing print culture and the methods of pedagogy that helped form nineteenth-century readers' attitudes toward the purpose and practice of reading and influenced their actual process when they sat down to read. But other socioeconomic and cultural conditions and practices provided crucial ingredients to the mix, as well. The growing professionalization of science, the application of the scientific method into new fields, such as medicine, and the rise of taxonomy, all contribute to the valorization of Science and its ability to sculpt the contours of race, but also to the context in which reading functioned as the discernment of difference. Moreover, we must consider the production of race as visible in order to uncover the preconditions for race as readable and reading as a useful metaphor in the dissemination of scientific racism. Each of these factors contributes to reading's labile operation and its ability to portray and structure race.[34]

[34] Clearly, the institution of slavery was probably the most influential to the context in which race was produced and read. As the nineteenth century progressed, slaveholders increasingly drew on "scientific" justifications for slavery. Ethnologists often collected testimonial information from slaveholders, from the medical records and treatment of slaves, and from "research" done directly on people held in bondage. For a small sampling of recent scholarship on slavery, see the following: David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 2004); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Phila.: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery And The Making Of America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Theresa A. Singleton, *"I, Too, Am American": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life* (University Press of Virginia, 1999); Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, & Subjects: The Culture Of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth In Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995).

Literacy, Print Culture, and Schoolbooks

Rapid advancements in print, communications, and transportation technologies, plus the development of eyeglasses and improved lighting techniques[35] combined in the early national period to produce what historians of the book have long referred to as an "Age of Print."[36] Print matter was seemingly everywhere, often printed by small, local businesses, and Americans were eager to read the variety of pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, and books that came into their hands through booksellers in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, local printers, and the scores of reading communities formed through colleges, libraries, local schools, lyceums, debating clubs, women's reading circles, African-Americans' mutual improvement societies, and the like (Gross 1-5).[37]

[35] Ronald Zboray discusses technologies that contributed to the print explosion, such as the steam press, the railroad, and the invention of eyeglasses. Ronald Zboray, "Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation," *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*. Ed. Cathy Davidson. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 180-200. For information about improvements in print technology—typecasting and stereotype plates—see, Michael Winship, "Manufacturing and Book Production." *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* Eds. Scott Casper, Jeffrey Groves, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship. Vol. 3. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007). To learn about transportation and communications technologies, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007).

[36] Robert Gross, "Introduction: An Extensive Republic." *A History of the Book in America. An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*. Eds. Robert Gross and Mary Kelley. Vol. 2. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010). 1-52; Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States: The Creation of an Industry, 1630-1865* vol. 1 (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Phila.: U of Pennsylvania P, 1959).

[37] Robert Gross, "Introduction." *An Extensive Republic*. Alongside this "reading revolution" was a growth of professional authorship. See Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) and William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* Ed. Matthew J. Burccolli. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1968).

In this "Age of Print," literacy was represented as of the highest good. Not only did literacy offer the possibility of entrance into one of the reading communities listed above, but literacy served as a primary agent of modernization and democracy. For the individual, literacy was seen to develop socioeconomic value, links to the larger community, knowledge, social and economic mobility, rationality, morality, and orderliness. For the nation, literacy was depicted as increasing the gross national product, and creating a shared national identity, the ability to disseminate information, an educated workforce and an engaged electorate.[38] The centrality of literacy to modern nation-states was uncontested in the popular and political mind. What is more, the nineteenth century posited reading as a method for moral reform and social rehabilitation.[39] Thus, literacy touched Americans lives on almost every level, from the most personal, in the form of private letters or diaries, to the regional, through local newspapers and almanacs, to the national, in newspapers, pamphlets, and books which covered national issues. Indeed, the increase in literacy and the spread of public education has been credited with the development of national and/or sectional identity.[40]

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[38] Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981) 58-88; Harvey J. Graff, *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic P, 1979). xiv-17.

[39] For a discussion of reading as a means of reform, see María Carla Sánchez, *Reforming the World: Social Activism and the Problem of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century America* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008); David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004); Carol Colatrella, *Literature and Moral Reform: Melville and the Discipline of Reading* (UP of Florida, 2002) and Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003).

[40] For the argument that print culture was essential to the formation of national identity, see Ronald Zboray, *A Fictive People*. For an opposing view, which highlights local and regional reading publics with differentiated identities, see Trish Loughram, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007). For an account which acknowledges print's dual function to both create community and foster sectionalism, see Robert Gross and Mary Kelley, eds. *A History of the Book in America. An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*. Vol. 2. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010).

In an atmosphere of widespread support for literacy, public education for some Americans expanded, bolstered by a growing nationalism and the desire to create good citizens.[41] Furthermore, the elimination of property requirements for voters, increased immigration, and a compelling need for an educated work force all contribute importantly to the establishment of public schools throughout the United States.[42] But even as educational opportunities for white Americans were increasing during the Jacksonian era, the chances for African-Americans to acquire learning were shrinking. Especially in the wake of a series of slave uprisings in North Carolina, the publication of David Walker's *Appeal, In Four Articles: Together With a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those in the United States* (1829), and the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, southern states criminalized the teaching of reading and writing to *free* blacks, passed new regulations to prohibit or supervise the gathering of slaves and free blacks, even for religious purposes, outlawed the teaching of slaves to read or write, and limited the use of passes for travel (Gross 527-28).[43] As the industrial revolution converted Southern slavery from a patriarchal to an economic institution, social

[41] The growing support for public education was not entirely unproblematic or democratic in character. The middle classes feared the threat of moral contamination of their children by mixing with poor and immigrant children in the public schools. On the other hand, public schooling helped to minimize the social dangers an underclass posed by indoctrinating them into the habits of good citizenship. See "Infant Schools," *Ladies' Magazine* 5 (April 1832). 182.

[42] See Barbara Sicherman, "Ideologies and Practices of Reading," *The Industrial Book*. 279-303; Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 1964); R. F. Butts and L. A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture* (New York: Holt, 1955). 215-17. 257-59. 272-73.; and, Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981).

[43] Robert Gross, "Reading for an Extensive Republic." *An Extensive Republic* 516-44; See also, Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005). 7-29, 203-13; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Literacy and Liberty," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 108 (1998): 309-41; Janet D. Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1991). 29-35; C. G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (New York: 1919). 80-85. *Project Gutenberg.* Feb. 2004. Web. 4 May 2010.

attitudes hardened into the definition of the slave as chattel. The slave's economic value was maximized in most cases by denying him or her education and maintaining the chattel status.

Nineteenth-century methods of teaching reading can tell us much about how the process of reading was conceived and practiced and about what this praxis contributed to the context in which race was read. Most of this instruction occurred through the reader, which became the major schoolbook of common schools in the 1820s. The teaching of reading was critical in the nineteenth-century classroom both because reading was the primary means of instruction for a whole range of subjects—grammar, history, geography, spelling—and because reading was central to full participation in the public sphere. When nineteenth century educators spoke of "reading," what they often meant was lessons in elocution. Reading was an oratorical skill for display in both public and private. Students were required to memorize famous speeches, poems, or dramas and deliver them in contests of oratory performed for the local community.[44] Imitation of successful orators was encouraged. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), Frederick Douglass writes about his adolescent reading of speeches by William Pitt, George Washington, and Cicero collected in Caleb Bingham's 1797 schoolbook, *Columbian Orator* (Douglass 51; Gundacker 485).[45] Samuel Griswold Goodrich's *The Third Reader: For the Use of Schools* (c1839) begins by offering the student a series of 28 rules for acquiring strong reading skills; 27 of the 28 rules provide advice

[44] See Robert Gross, "Reading for an Extensive Republic." *An Extensive Republic* 516-44; Dean Grodzins and Leon Jackson, "Colleges and Print Culture." *An Extensive Republic* 318-31; Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public After the Revolution* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009); J.M. Opal, "Exciting Emulation: Academies and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1780s-1820s," *Journal of American History* 91 (Sept. 2004): 445-70.

[45] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* 1845. *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader.* Ed. William L. Andrews. (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) ; Grey Gundaker, "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice." *An Extensive Republic.* 483-95.

on pronunciation, locution, posture, and expression while reading aloud. McGuffey's *Eclectic Reader* exhorts:

> It ought to be a leading object to teach the art of reading. It ought to occupy *threefold more time* than it does. . . . It is better that a girl should return from school a first-rate *reader*, than a first-rate performer on the pianoforte. The voice of song is not sweeter than the voice of *speakers*. Let us see years devoted to this accomplishment. (qtd. in Sullivan 45; italics in original)[46]

The very phrases emphasized in the above passage point to the virtual equation of reading with oration and the view of reading as a public performance, rather than a solitary practice. To whatever degree it formed "interpretive communities,"[47] to whatever degree reading literally brought people together into reading societies, the instruction of reading in schools shaped the material practice of actual readers both in the selections they read in their schoolbooks and in the ways they understood their reading process. As we shall see, nineteenth-century schoolbooks depicted and promoted reading as a public activity, more aligned to oration than private reflection.

In many ways, the readers available in antebellum schools represent the conservative influence of highly moralistic spellers, like Noah Webster's of 1782, or the overtly religious *New England Primer*. However, the reader appears in the schoolhouse at a unique time, with the growth of the notion of state-supported education and, therefore, participates in a "progressive" impulse, aiming less at religious instruction and more broadly at character formation (Monaghan and Monaghan 311-12).[48] Henry Vail, a turn of the century official from the American Book Company, a leading publisher of schoolbooks, commented that "Readers were the proper and

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[46] Mark Sullivan, *Our Times* (New York: Scribners, 1927).

[47] Stanley Fish describes shared strategies of reading texts as "interpretive communites." See Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum" *Critical Inquiry* vol 2.3 (Spring 1976) 465-85; Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980).

[48] Charles Monaghan and Jennifer Monaghan, "Schoolbooks." *An Extensive Republic*. 304-318.

indispensable texts for teaching integrity, honesty, industry, temperance, true patriotism, courage, politeness, and all other moral and intellectual virtues" (qtd. in Sullivan 7). The purposes reading was seen to serve are civic purposes, not individual ones like, for instance, satisfaction, pleasure, or intellectual stimulation.

The shift from the religious to the secular was not the only change in reading pedagogy during the early nineteenth century. The instruction of reading was influenced most strongly by the work of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss educator who argued that children learn best through the senses and direct contact with the physical world. He eschewed rote learning and corporal punishment. This child-centered approach had marked effect on the schoolbook industry. Whereas the early authors of readers were men of some standing in religion and scholastics, often they were not what, today, we would consider to be experts in pedagogy.[49] In fact, most eighteenth-century schoolbooks were produced through a combination of compilation and plagiarism of earlier, mostly British texts, often copied word for word without any mention of the original source.[50] These early readers included little conscious theorizing about reading methods and relied largely on learning by rote. But the Pestalozzian

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[49] Most early schoolbook authors were from New England and incorporated a strong New England partiality into their work. Indeed, with the exception of the McGuffey brothers, the most popular textbook authors were all from New England: Noah Webster, Jedidiah Morse, S. G. Goodrich, C. A. Goodrich, S. Augustus Mitchell, Jesse Olney, and Emma Willard were from Conneticut; from Massachusetts, Lyman Cobb, William Woodbridge, Richard Parker, and Salem Town; John Frost was from Maine and Benjamin D. Emerson was from New Hampshire (Elson 7). They also often held high standing in their communities. Lindley Murray, a New England Quaker by birth and eminent authority on English grammar produced a much duplicated 1799 series of Readers. The "Peter Parley's" Readers of 1839 were assembled by S.G. Goodrich, a relative of Noah Webster, the author of the well-known "Blue-Back Speller" and dictionary. In 1825, John Pierpont, a New England scholar clergyman and grandfather and great grandfather to the banking father and son, John Pierpont Morgan, Sr. and John Pierpont Morgan, Jr., released his Reader.

[50] It is not until 1790, with the passage of national copyright legislation, that American schoolbook authors could raise any money from the sale of their work. As the market for schoolbooks grew, so, too, did their publication. In 1840, schoolbook publishing comprised about 40% of the total publishing in the U.S. See Monaghan and Monaghan, "Schoolbooks." *An Extensive Republic*. 304-318.

movement changed that, even making way for alternative educational methods, such as the Lancasterian approach, based on the theories of Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838). The Lancasterian approach involved older students monitoring the lessons of younger students with lessons designed to emphasize repetition and memorization. The movement, which was implemented as a way of stretching scarce resources for teachers and funding, was relatively short-lived as an educational reform, dying out in the 1820s with the increase in teacher training and public support for common schools. Ultimately, both the Pestalozzian and Lancasterian movements influenced the curriculum of schoolbooks and the instruction of reading in the classroom. Many texts, such as the well-known *Eclectic Readers* series (1836-'57) by William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1873), tried to incorporate aspects of a variety of prominent educational theories (Monaghan and Monaghan 312-14).[51]

One example of an educational reform sparked by Pestalozzi was the de-emphasis of rote learning and the focus on reading for comprehension. Goodrich's *The Third Reader* reminds young students to "Remember that the object of reading . . . is to acquire ideas and sentiments that are written or printed" (7).[52] Actually, Goodrich's injunction is less reminder and more reform. *The Third Reader* was teaching students a relatively *new* way of reading: reading for understanding. Despite this progressive intent, the text includes no further discussion of the reading process by which ideas and sentiments are acquired. However, it spends the next four pages offering advice on reading aloud. An 1828 reader by Samuel Putnam declares in its preface: "A leading object of this work is to enable the scholar while learning to *read*, to

[51] See also, Richard L. Venezky, "A History of the American Reading Textbook," *Elementary School Journal* 87 (1987): 250-52.

[52] S.G. Goodrich, *The Third Reader: For the Use of Schools* (Louisville, KY: Morton & Griswald, c1839). *Nietz Old Textbook Collection*. Digital Research Library, University of Pittsburgh. Web. 11 Sept. 2002.

understand, at the same time, the meaning of the words he is reading" (3; italics in original).[53] Such promises in the introductions, prefaces, and "Hints to Teachers" sections of readers were common and suggest a desire to respond to changes in educational theory and offer teachers new methods of instruction, but the schoolbooks, on the whole, contain a great deal of material intended for rote learning and imitation.

This combination of older instructional methods and newer reforms reminds us that reading is a historically-constructed practice, formed by cultural concepts and individual acts. In antebellum schoolbooks, we see an interesting moment in the construction of reading because it is one in flux between a notion of reading as public, spoken art, involving imitation, and a more progressive view of reading as means of comprehension on an individual level. The reader's role as an interpreter is recognized in both of these conceptions of reading, but recognized differently in each. In the former view of reading, interpretation is mostly perceived as repetition or imitation, whereas in the latter view of reading, interpretation is a matter of circumspection. The careful reader comprehends, while the careless reader misunderstands, Goodrich's *Third Reader* warns:

> Even when you sit down to read by yourself, be careful to read every word and sentence. If there is anything you do not perfectly comprehend, ask some person to explain it to you. If you meet with words you do not know the meaning of, consult a dictionary. If you read carelessly, you subject yourself to two evils: you miss the object of reading, which is to gain knowledge, and you are in danger of adopting the habit of reading in a negligent and slovenly manner; which is a very bad habit. You should consider a book as a box of jewels, and you must read attentively, or they may slip through your fingers. (7)

By unpacking, for instance, how interpretation as a concept is differently posited in the various forms of reading instruction taught in antebellum schools, we can begin to sketch out the major theoretical strands competing within the notion of reading.

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[53] See Samuel Putnam, *The Analytical Reader*. 4th ed. (Dover, N. H.: Samuel C. Stevens, 1828).

For, the meanings, purposes, goals, and effects of reading were not undisputed, but the subject of much popular discussion. Barbara Sicherman points to at least four "approved models of reading [that] coexisted in the mid-nineteenth century: the evangelical, the civic, the self-improving, and the cultural or cosmopolitan" (283). The "models" she details are formed by different sets of beliefs about the purposes of reading and each "model" competes in a social arena for supremacy and practioners. One key arena in which we can partially recover this contested notion of reading is within nineteenth-century literary reviews. Nina Baym maintains that reviewers did not talk about reading as interpretation: "never—not in a single instance—did they talk about the act of reading novels as one of producing meanings, interpretations, or readings" (61).[54] James Machor, on the other hand, suggests that literary reviewers "practiced interpretation," providing a model for the readers of reviews, whether or not they had devised a vocabulary for talking about their process (338).[55] What is important to acknowledge, is that "interpretation" is constructed in and through the ways we think and talk about reading. Literary reviewers, reinforced the view of reading as a concept requiring little theorization, though the fact that they avoided discussion of interpretation, is itself a way of conceiving of the reading process. Just as the schoolbooks modeled for students a reading process that was formed primarily around either imitation or comprehension, literary reviewers modeled a reading process that was immediate and uncomplicated, quite unlike the sense of tenuousness or indeterminacy often ascribed to our modern notion of interpretation.[56] I want to make clear that interpretation

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[54] Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

[55] James Machor, "Fiction and Informed Reading in Nineteenth-Century America" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47.3 (1992): 320-48.

[56] Given my argument throughout—that reading, and the interpretation which is part of the process, is an historical construction—it would be foolish to here suggest that there is current critical or popular agreement on the

was part of the notion of reading exemplified by nineteenth-century schoolbooks and literary reviewers alike; it was just an understanding of the practice different from our current theorizations. For nineteenth-century readers, interpretation was a much more contracted process that we often understand it to be and not one perceived as being as individualistic as our notion suggests.

In the subsequent analysis of racial discourse, we will see that Ethnology relies on a combination of the model of interpretation posited by pre-Pestalozzi schoolbooks and the simple, direct form of reading described by nineteenth-century literary reviewers. These models of interpretation suggest that reading itself is mostly a repetitious or imitative act. While it becomes quite difficult to gauge the reading practice or response of actual, antebellum readers, we can make some surmises about how they might have read ethnological texts from our consideration of how reading was taught in schools, assuming that readers' practice would be shaped primarily by the formal training they received, but also by other factors, as well.

"Favorable to division"

In his 1854 speech at Western Reserve, Frederick Douglass called attention to one of Ethnology's leading methodologies, classification. "This is, you know, an age of science, and science is favorable to division," Douglass explained (Ruchames 481). With regard to the concept of race, classification is more than a methodology, but its organizing principle. For, race is the codification of difference. But racial classification was not the only form of classification

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"meaning" and process of interpretation. I am not trying to claim a single, operative mode of interpretation in our current moment, but to point to the very situation I am describing, following the arguments of deconstruction, where we tend to speak of "meanings" and "functions" to highlight the sense of ambivalence in the concept.

produced by scientific researchers in the nineteenth century. That is, the classification and categorization required to construct the notion of race were not isolated intellectual maneuvers. Bruce Dain argues that racial classification is part of a larger, cultural strategy of classification systems.[57] Charles Caldwell's 1811 essay, a critical review of Samuel Stanhope Smith's (1751-1819) treatise on monogenesis[58] offers convincing evidence for Dain's claim. A prominent North Carolina doctor, Caldwell (1772-1853) propounds the tenets of polygenesis—multiple, discrete creations of human beings, rather than the Christian Biblical account of a single human creation—but before he moves into the primary argument of the essay, he includes this celebration of taxonomy: "A mere knowledge of facts is not however alone sufficient to satisfy the generous cravings of a mind enamoured of science, and devoted to research. Such a mind, eagerly grasping at higher honours, and under the influence of more comprehensive views, derives a superior delight from the classification and arrangement of facts, the deduction of principles, and the exposition of causes. By an intellect of this description, facts are employed as necessary but subordinate instruments—they are, at best, but the *gradus ad Parnassum*—the means of ascent to the hill of the Muses" (129).[59] By virtue of the organization of the essay, Caldwell himself posits the "superior delight" derived from classification as the context for his argument in favor of polygenesis. Human beings form ideal classifiable objects for Caldwell and

[57] Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).

[58] *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*[58] (1787; 1810) by Samuel Stanhope Smith argued that climate and, to a lesser degree, cultural and social influences determined differences between the races. Smith, professor of moral philosophy and, later, president of the College of New Jersey, present-day Princeton, disputed the notion that became known as polygenesis, and maintained the view that all humans were the result of a single pair of divinely created humans and formed a single species.

[59] Charles Caldwell, "An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species," *American Review of History and Politics*, 2 (July 1811): 128-166. Internet Archive. Cornell University. Web. 23 March 2010.

the ethnologists to follow him and they understand this categorization as occurring within a "comprehensive view," a habit of mind that holds the "arrangement" of information above the facts themselves. Carolyn Sorisio comments that "[t]he sheer volume of statistics collected, skulls and skeletons studied, tables calculated, and cadavers dissected in the antebellum era points to an intense desire to classify, to master humankind as one would any other natural object" (17). The pleasure of classification itself surely influences the expectation that human beings displayed categorical differences.

Classification and categorization helped to stabilize and naturalize races, to such an extent that the concept of race as difference has been integral to American identity ever since. Phrenology was at the forefront of this racial study precisely because it purported to produce classifiable, quantitative, scientific data that could be evaluated in place of more subjective information. The multiple differences between humans—physical, intellectual, emotional, behavioral—could be dealt with, studied, and categorized in a relatively reproducible way, the phrenologists suggested, because the body without was merely a representation of the mind within. By studying the form of the external body, the truth of the internal mind could be read. George Sumner Weaver's "Lectures on Moral Science According to the Philosophy of Phrenology" (1852) addresses the matter directly: "Is this difference [, the differences between people,] written in, or on the outward man, so that we can read it? Phrenology says it is" (63).[60] Weaver makes use of the concept of reading to give form to the interpretive process practiced in phrenology. He represents the body as a text on which difference is written. Phrenology, then, claims to be a simple process of interpreting that difference.

[60] George Sumner Weaver, "Lectures on Mental Science According to the Philosophy of Phrenology (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1852). 1995. *The Making of America*. U of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Web. 4 March 2010.

Yet, it is crucial to realize that figuring this interpretation as *reading* is itself an act of representation. To depict the collection and interpretation of measurements of the human body as reading is to endow data collection and interpretation with the history and associations of the term "reading." It is also to formulate a concept of reading as derivation, as an uncomplicated process of scanning and recording anatomical features. Furthermore, in Weaver's text, just as we saw in Well's *How to Read Character*, reading ultimately becomes the discernment of difference. Using reading as the metaphor to represent the interpretive practices of phrenology had the net effect of naturalizing the difference perceived by that interpretation. In this case, phrenological "readings" of the skull make their findings seem "natural" by suggesting that their claims are written on the body for those who have eyes to read it. What could be more "natural" than the body itself and the messages that are seemingly inscribed upon it?

Weaver's text falls more into the category of popular phrenology than did the writings of, say, George Combe (1788-1858), a practitioner of the earlier, more scientific form of phrenology also practiced by Charles Caldwell, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Isaac Ray, among others. In the preface to his *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* (1828), Combe declares phrenology "is valuable, only insofar as it is *a just exposition* of what previously existed in human nature" (italics in original).[61] As Combe emphasizes, the goal here would seem to be accurate translation of the obscure messages of the body into some more readily read form. Phrenology claims to be the means of doing that very thing. Thus, the concept of reading serves as an useful explanatory model for both the earlier, scientific practitioners of phrenology and for those who later popularized the study of phrenology. For both groups, reading operates

[61] George Combe, "Preface to the Edinburgh edition of 1828." *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* 1828. (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1850). 1995. *The Making of America*. U of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Web. 4 March 2010

similarly, allowing for the supposition that phrenology is simply a translation of information from the surface of the skull to the surface of the text.

Race as Visible

What is, perhaps, most remarkable about the phrenologist's, and later, the ethnologist's use of reading to elaborate race is not that the text which must be read is one of flesh and blood, rather than paper, but that reading serves as metaphor for race while belying the most fundamental aspects of the process of reading. My point is that despite the fact that reading is used to explain the phrenologist or ethnologist's racial claims about a body, interpretive reading is downplayed. The text of race is not one which is read afresh in each new text, but one already inscribed on the body in endless repetition. To achieve this repetition of racial scripts, race must first be produced as visible, self-evident, and external. The racial discourse of the early nineteenth century uses vision, observation, and visibility to produce and image a concept of race as visible in order to predetermine the way race is read.

Charles Caldwell's 1811 review of the second edition of Samuel Stanhope Smith's *Essay* gives evidence to the growing depiction of race in visual terms as the century progressed. Caldwell begins his essay:

> Were it possible for an individual to be translated to a situation sufficiently commanding, and imbued with optics sufficiently powerful, to take, at once, a clear and discriminating survey of the whole earth—could he examine with accuracy and distinctly perceive the appearance and sensible character of every thing existing on its surface—diversities of color, of form, of dimension, of motion, and all other external properties of matter—were such an event possible, we say, one of the most curious and interesting objects that would attract our

> spectator's attention would be, the variety discoverable in the complexion and feature, the figure and stature of the human race. (128)[62]

The vocabulary of vision predominates in this excerpt and throughout the essay. Caldwell speaks of a "commanding" view, of powerful "optics," and a multitude of visual phenomena—color, shape, motion. With each of these figures of speech, he lays the groundwork for a notion of race that is primarily visible, an "obvious" difference. After describing the appearance of the Caucasian race in the most exalted tones and the "Negro" in the lowliest, Caldwell continues the essay:

> But although there exists in relation to our globe, no such mount of vision, as our fancy has been figuring—and though it does not belong to mortal organs to embrace at a single view the whole earth clothed by its inhabitants as with a party-colored vesture—yet still, the existing diversity in the complexion and figure of the human race is a circumstance of such familiar notoriety, that we are permitted to bring it before the eye of the mind, and dwell on it as if it were present in a visible shape: in a manner so clear and definitive has the fact been established by the pursuits of ambition, the enterprise of discovery, and the cupidity of gain. (128)

The vocabulary of vision is repeated, this time emphasizing the "familiar notoriety" of visual differences between the races. Moreover, not only does Caldwell represent racial differences in visual terms, but he also represents the problem of racial difference itself as if it were "in a visible shape," that it might be dwelled on by "the eye of the mind," a visible feature, a "fact" of "familiar notoriety," commonplace. The degree to which racial difference had become accepted as commonsensical authorizes Caldwell's extended discussion of difference and, therefore, his representation of race in visual terms. Caldwell acknowledges the scientific community's partial knowledge about race, "it does not belong to mortal organs to embrace at a single view the whole earth clothed by its inhabitants as with a party-colored vesture." Nonetheless, he depicts race

[62] Charles Caldwell, "An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species," *American Review of History and Politics*, 2 (July 1811): 128-166. Internet Archive. Cornell University. Web. 23 March 2010.

and racial difference as "clear and definitive" "fact," appropriately represented in visual terms to underscore their self-evidence.

That race and racial difference had come to be understood in visual terms is significant because with this representation is the implicit assertion that race is a clearly manifested feature of the body, requiring little proof or interpretation, despite its apparent evocativeness. That is, though race is depicted as a known quantity, as an anatomical "fact" at the core of every body, necessitating little in the way of explanation, it is also simultaneously telling. Race speaks in remarkably potent ways, yet it seemingly requires no interpretation. What is to be known about race is known on visual examination of the body. For instance, when Caldwell disputes Smith's claim that domestic slaves receive an ameliorating influence from their proximity to white masters' manners, better food and lodging, he draws upon supposed visual evidence to the contrary. Smith suggested that the facial features of house slaves become more "regular" when exposed to the influence of white civilization, while the features of field hands remain unchanged and exhibit the African "type." Caldwell counters: "We have ourselves resided, and travelled [sic] not a little in the southern states, and can therefore, speak from personal observation on the subject of the African race, in that section of our country. . . . to pronounce the mouth of the African well sized and beautiful, and the composition of his features regular, is undoubtedly an error, and one which might easily be corrected by observation. We have ourselves seen many Africans (full-blooded ones we believe) . . ." (Caldwell 158-59). For Caldwell, "observation" is the highest authority. Because he has "seen" "full-blooded" Africans, Caldwell counts himself qualified to descant on the "deformity and irregularity" of their features (Caldwell 159). Caldwell's insistence on the commonsensical status of race and personal

observation as its ultimate authentication, naturalizes the concept of race so that it seems the known, familiar quantity Caldwell claims race to be.

Yet, the categories described and prized by nineteenth century scientists were not always as stable as they would have liked them to seem. The case of one Henry Moss (1754?-?), a Virginia-born slave who fought in the Revolutionary War, for instance, challenged the prevailing definitions of "race," particularly concepts of race based on skin color. In 1792, Moss developed a skin condition in which large areas of his body seemed to lose their dark complexion and appeared white. Moss himself recognized the opportunity his illness provided; he went to Philadelphia in 1796 and advertised his condition in the newspapers, charging 25 cents admission to see him. Moss eventually bought his freedom with the proceeds from admission charges. His skin condition was widely discussed in both scientific and popular circles. Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) examined Moss and determined that "the Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes is derived from the leprosy" (qtd. in Stanton 7).[63] Extra dark pigmentation was the only symptom of this mild form of leprosy from which most "Negroes" suffered, Rush claimed. Moss, on the other hand, was mysteriously healing. Stanhope Smith formed an opinion about Moss's condition as well. Smith maintained that Moss's change of skin color pointed to climate as the source of differences in complexion. Under the influence of a more temperate clime, Moss's skin was losing its brown color and becoming pale instead (Stanton 5-7).

Moss's illness challenged definitions of race which rely on visible factors like skin color. Not only did the prominent theorists of race come to differing explanations of Moss's condition, but the differences in their theories point to variations in the very concept and category of "race." Henry Moss's health condition was an extraordinary case, but in locations all around the South,

[63] William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America 1815-59* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960).

as well as in the North, the complexions of countless individuals belied the simple equation of skin color to race. Mixed race persons displayed complexions of almost any shade, including slaves whose skin was so pale they could "pass" for white. In the face of such blatant disruption of supposedly stable categories, a great desire to assert the "naturalness" of race arose.[64] Sorisio explains: "The contradiction between an assumed permanent racial identity and dread of racial disintegration indicates anxiety over categories that, while fixed in theory, were, through the presence of real bodies, constantly flaunting their fiction. Strident efforts were made to reaffirm the naturalness of racial categories despite their apparent breakdown" (25). Scientific emphasis on categorization helped solidify the fiction of race.

Scientific discourse created and maintained very rigid characterizations of the races it delineated. When evidence that challenged racial categories surfaced, it was explained away or interpreted through existing concepts of racial difference and what were seen as the distinct characteristics of raced bodies. Sometimes these characteristics had to be revised slightly in order to accommodate the evidence and maintain racial categories. Take, for instance, the question of racial mixing. An individual of mixed white and black ancestry was known as a mulatto, a Spanish and Portuguese term that means "young mule" and suggests the cross between a horse and a donkey that results in a mule. The term, then, draws an analogy between

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[64] As tempting as it is for contemporary scholars to speak of race and racialist discourse in overarching terms, it is important to keep in mind the degree to which notions of race were in development and contestation in the popular mind. Though racial distinctions had become matters of law, race never became an undisputed category. Ariela Gross reminds us of the number of cases brought before state courts to determine the racial status of individuals. She explains: "While nineteenth-century white Southerners may have believed in a racial 'essence' inhering in one's blood, there was no agreement about how to discover it. Legal determinations of race could not simply reflect community consensus, because there was no consensus to reflect. Despite the efforts of legislatures to reduce racial identities to a binary system, and of judges to insist that determining race was a matter of common sense, Southern communities harbored disagreement, suspicion, and conflict--not only over who was black and who was white, but over how to make such determinations at all" (Gross). See Ariela J. Gross, "Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South" *Yale Law Journal* (1998). More recently, Bruce Dain has argued that there was no stable progression of racialist thought, but incremental, distinct developments. See Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind.*

the mixing of animal *species* and the mixing of human *races*. In the animal kingdom, such a cross between a horse and a donkey produces a mule, an useful, but sterile work animal.

The choice of analogy reveals much about race as it was constructed. First, the comparison to animals serves to dehumanize the people seen as "raced," a tactic oft-repeated in racialist literature. Second, the analogy's inaccuracy as far as the reproductive capacity of mixed race individuals goes, emphasizes the degree to which an analogy can be used to structure the content and function of race as a concept, accurate or not. Since much of the "research data" gathered by racial theorists came from slave populations, theorists had to be as aware as slaveholders themselves (they were sometimes the same individuals) that the sexual exploitation of African-American slave women often resulted in mixed race children, who would themselves grow to have their own children, often again, in abusive relationships with white slaveholders that produced more mixed race children. Nonetheless, the animal comparison in "mulatto" continues to inform mixed race identity, even though it did not offer a comparison that elucidated any, other than imagined, aspects of identity.[65] The title alone of Josiah Nott's 1843 article, "The Mulatto a Hybrid: Extermination of the Two Races if Whites and Blacks Are Allowed to Marry" exemplifies white fears about racial mixing or "amalgamation," as it was called.[66] Viewed as an

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[65] See Eve Allegria Raimon, The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century AntiSlavery Fiction (Piscataway: Rutgers UP, 2004). For a history of African-American women's sexuality and, especially, their negotiation of the Cult of True Womanhood, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* Black Women in United States History, vol. 2 (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990).

[66] See Josiah Nott, "The Mulatto a Hybrid: Extermination of the Two Races if Whites and Blacks Are Allowed to Marry" *The American Journal of Medical Sciences* 6 (1843): 252-256. The publication of this article led to the formation of a friendship between Samuel Morton and Nott. Morton wrote to Nott after reading and admiring the piece. They became friends and Morton acted as a mentor for Nott. Nott's *Types of Mankind* (1854) was published shortly after Morton died; Nott and Gliddon dedicate *Types* to Morton.

abolitionist aim, rather than the result of the exploitation and abuse of black, slave women by southern slaveholders, amalgamation was seen as an affront to white womanhood.[67]

Anxiety about racial mixing found expression in two competing depictions of the mulatto. On the one hand, because Caucasians were already represented as the superior race, the presence of white blood in an individual had to be championed as an enhancement and mulattoes were generally considered to be more intelligent than Negroes. Frederick Douglass's oratorical and literary skills were often attributed to his white heritage, rather than to his black.[68] On the other hand, this somewhat favorable depiction of mulattoes opened up the theoretical possibility of "breeding out" Negro characteristics through successive generations, essentially "erasing" racial difference through the course of time and generations. This possibility threatened the stability of the racial categories that were being established. In order to maintain the categories and the racial characters these claims were built on, scientists like Josiah Nott (1804-1873) described mulattoes as being of weak constitution, diseased, and, if not exactly sterile, then as subfertile. Some scientists claimed that the offspring of a mulatto would be infertile within four generations. Sorisio sums up the consequent points: "White identity, then, could never be obtained through amalgamation; the only outcome racial mixing could produce was the degeneracy of the Caucasian race and, by extension, the breakdown of American prosperity" (26).

[67] See Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America*, 25-27 for an useful discussion of white fears of amalgamation.

[68] In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass's second autobiography, he makes a more marked attempt to claim his heritage from his mother. He emphasizes his mother's literacy and intelligence and suggests that his own literary skill is owing to her lineage.

"Whiteness," as a racial category, included, on many levels, notions of national identity and national manifest destiny.[69] It almost always included the belief in white or Caucasian superiority over all other races. For example, Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) maintains in "The Diversity of the Origin of the Human Race"(1850) that the fact of "different races of men, inhabiting different parts" of the earth, "presses upon us [whites] the obligation to settle the relative rank among these races, the relative value of the characters peculiar to each, in a scientific point of view" (457).[70] Furthermore, he insists "human affairs with reference to the colored races would be far more judiciously conducted, if, . . . we were guided by a full consciousness of the real difference existing between us and them . . . rather than by treating them on terms of equality" (Agassiz 460).[71] Thus, Agassiz argued for the superiority of the white race and, consequently, white responsibility for determining how the other races ought to conduct themselves. Reginald Horsman studies the development of scientific racism alongside nationalism and American expansion. He contends that the discourse about whiteness emphasizes the "race's" Teutonic origins—German and English stock—and eventually settles upon an "Anglo-Saxon" identity. Anglo-Saxons, then, have a duty, on the one hand, to study the

[69] Robert Levine's recent study considers nineteenth-century American authors as critics of their own historical moment and the narratives it produced about nation and race. See Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2008); For studies that show how race and nationalism are intertwined, see Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005); David Goldberg, *The Racial State* (London: Routledge, 2002); Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klineberg, Irene Nexica, and Matt Wray, *The Making and Un-Making of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001); Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Duke UP, 1998); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Contract vol. 1* and *The Origin of Racial Opression in Anglo-America* vol. 2 (New York: Verso, 1994 and 1997); Saxton Alexander, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981).

[70] Louis Agassiz, "Diversity of the Origin of the Human Race" *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* 49 (July 1850): 141-145, in Louis Ruchames, ed. *Racial Thought in America: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln*. Vol. 1. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1969). 457-61.

[71] Ibid.

question of race, and on the other, to spread Anglo-Saxon "civilization" throughout the world (Horsman 116-157).[72]

The belief in white racial superiority fueled American expansionism and offered political justification for Indian removal. It also contributed to a sense of fatalism with regard to Native Americans, a sense of their impending extinction as a "race." Indian extermination was inevitable, from this point of view, because of a foundational, physical inferiority. *De Bow's Review*, a monthly magazine published first in Charleston in 1846, but later in New Orleans by J. D. B. De Bow (1820-1867), a friend of Josiah Nott and defender of Nott's racial views, analyzed the problem of the Indian, concluding: "Do what we will, the Indian remains the Indian still. He is not a creature susceptible of civilization; and all contact of him with the white race is death. He dwindles before them—imbibing all their vices, and none of their virtues. He can no more be civilized than the leopard can change his spots. His race is run, and probably he has performed his earthly mission. He is now gradually disappearing, to give place to a higher order of beings. The order of nature must have its course" (147).[73] The *De Bow*'s article actually considers a degree of white responsibility for Indian decline—the establishment of hunting for financial profit, exposure to new diseases like small pox, and the introduction of alcohol into Indian communities—but ultimately suggests that a core inferiority makes Native Americans vulnerable. Their inferiority is simply an expression of "nature" and Indian extermination is a return to a natural order where whites are always at the top.

What is more, for ethnologists and their adherents, the physical features of the body tell the story, not only of race, but of the intellectual and moral qualities as well. At the same time

[72] Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

[73] "The Indians of the United States—Their Past, Their Present, and Their Future." *De Bow's Review*. 16.2 (Feb. 1854): 143-49. *Making of America Journal Articles*. U of Michigan. Web. 18 May 2010.

the scientific language of "observation" and the figurative language of visibility are being applied to the developing notion of "race," the concept is also gathering meanings that are, more precisely, *invisible*. Mental, physical, and behavioral qualities and capacities are understood to attach, indivisibly, to bodies. The raced body lives out its racial characteristics; it cannot vary, alter, or improve its racial lot. Though the process of genetic inheritance was not fully understood in the early nineteenth century, the notion that offspring carry traits of their parents was well recognized. Prominent physical traits of the parents, like complexion shade, are often reproduced in the children. In this way, race was recognized as inheritable in some not entirely understood manner. Thus, while race is being defined in terms of the visible, there is also at least a half-recognition of some other *invisible* core, a secret at the heart of race. This invisible core of race appears in twofold fashion: firstly, as an imperative that the scrutinized body will speak the truth of race and, secondly, as the supposed claim that a series of intellectual and moral traits characterize racial and national groups. The field of phrenology is an example of this first manifestation. Ethnographic studies linking racial groups with intellectual, moral, and behavioral traits and capacities are examples of the second manifestation.

The imaging of race as visible is more than the simple claim that race is detectable through the eyes, or that race is based on skin color. Whereas race could have been imagined as a distinction perceived, like class, through speech or mannerisms, it was instead produced as visible. The production of race as visible has to do with simplifying race into self-evidence. The visibility of race streamlines the process by which race is perceived, or read. There is no need to interpret race, such a depiction implies. Race is readily apparent by sight, the view suggests. By

eradicating the *process* of perception, race as visible simplifies the *product* of perception, race itself. Thus, the end product is the view of race as visible, self-evident, external, and natural.[74]

Figuring race as visible lays the necessary groundwork for reading race. Race's supposed self-evidence means that race can be read in the same way every time. But the metaphor of reading race has space for deeper meanings, as well. Reading can also accommodate invisible notions of race, because of reading's association with interpretation. The implication that race is a visible text, but also one that holds invisible meanings, is made possible through metaphorical connection with reading, a concept that already neatly holds both a notion of immediate comprehension and reflective interpretation. In this circuitous way, the multiple resonances of reading provide the structure to organize a notion of race that is both visible and invisible, externally read and internally governed.

Reading the (In)Visible

Reading operated as a key technology in the dissemination of scientific racism. It would be an oversimplification to say that race existed primarily on the pages of scientific treatises, but there would be an accuracy in insisting on both race's constructed status, and on the fact that the form of race which we inherit from the antebellum era is a concept largely produced within the scientific community. To emphasize the production of race in the scientific community during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries is not to deny the determining roles real people played as they negotiated the complicated economic, legal, cultural, and personal dynamics of relations

[74] Ian Finseth argues that concepts of nature informed notions of race and racial identity in the early national and antebellum periods. Race develops through the natural sciences and images of the natural world aid the discourse of both pro and anti-slavery forces. See Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2009).

between people situated in diverse power positions, nor is it to suggest that racial theorists operated in a "scientific" context that was separate from the wider cultural milieu, but it is to say that the particular form of race elaborated in antebellum America was one that, while influenced by real life and earlier views of race, was produced by the scientific community[75] in their exchanges with each other and unique to the intellectual perspective, methodologies, and evaluations of Ethnology. The natural sciences, in particular, were transforming the world view of Western culture by challenging deeply held religious beliefs and substituting them with a sense of natural order or Law. Natural law was often figured as following from the "mind of God," as a conscious or unconscious way to harmonize Christian beliefs with the new scientific tenets.

The conversation carried on by American researchers of race occurred mostly in print or by letter. Though Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), Nott, George Gliddon (1809-1857), and Agassiz were known personally to each other, they came to these relationships initially by reading each other's work and they maintained their personal and professional connections through letter writing and published works. In other words, they used the technologies of the day to establish relationships amongst each other and to exchange data and theories. In their texts, they could try out premises and get responses from other researchers, which allowed them to develop a sense of themselves as a community. Over time, this community worked out a core set of common values, methods, and theories and these could be shared with the reading public at

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[75] By referring to the "scientific community" I want to establish a shared paradigm or way of viewing the world according to the scientific method of observation and data collection. I do not want to overstate the degree to which this diverse group of researchers, some physicians, some not, constituted a "community." Nott complained about his isolation in Mobile, Alabama and the lack of colleagues with whom he could share ideas. Morton feared attack by clerics. Agassiz, Nott, and Gliddon were challenged on religious grounds. Each, in their separate ways, struggled with a version of isolation from peers, but through letters and the exchange of their published work, the "American school" of Ethnology established its own international reputation and developed its peculiar views on "race."

large through publication in magazines.[76] Race, as a topic of scientific discussion, depended largely on print because the print technologies and distribution of the nineteenth century allowed for a conversation to develop among theorists widely and differently situated, both geographically and theoretically. Importantly, print technologies and their distribution brought the theoretical conversations of a small group of scientists into the hands of countless interested individuals, some of whom picked up the pen themselves to add their own views to the discussion.

This crossover between "scientists" and less credentialed individuals who wrote about race, especially in the popular journals and magazines, demonstrates an early flexibility in the discipline of Ethnology. The field was also distinguished by a strong reliance on personality. The main players in the study of Ethnology were intensely loyal to each other. The degree of personal loyalty developed by Nott and Gliddon for Morton and his work is apparent in the text of *Types of Mankind*. The volume includes a steel-engraved portrait of Morton, a dedication to him, and a memoir of Morton written by another of his followers, Henry S. Patterson, a Philadelphia doctor and Professor at the College of Pennsylvania. Nott includes long excerpts from Morton's *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844) in his own essays in the text. The memoir even includes an excerpt from Morton's own youthful poetry. Thus, *Types of Mankind* strays from a strictly "scientific" publication, as do many of the platforms in which the ethnologists published

[76] The group of researchers writing and theorizing about race in the early to mid-nineteenth-century formed, what John Swales would call a "discourse community," or "sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" (9). See John Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic Research Settings* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990). Many linguists have since moved to the term "communities of practice" to better describe the shared enterprise of such communities. What I want to highlight here is not only the community of practice constituted by the American School of Ethnology, but also the degree to which ethnologists wrote to a larger, public community. In order to do so, they needed to find a language which could convey the specificites of their theory without isolating non-specialists. The concept of reading served as a metaphor that could bridge the gap between specialists and non-specialists alike, by presenting unfamiliar premises and "scientific" data through the metaphor of an already familiar and comfortable process, reading. For more about "communities of practice, see Ann M. Johns,

their work. For the most part, the "American School" of Ethnology published in popular, rather than peer-reviewed publications. Even in these popular sources, the usual decorum and standards of debate were suspended to in order to accommodate the heated exchange of racial theorists. In an 1845 note from the editor, the *Southern Quarterly Review* complained about the "attic-salt" used in these exchanges and warned that decorum was suspended "in the allowance of discussion" "on the *single* condition that it be for the advancement of science" (148; italics in original).[77] Despite the leniency of expression some publications allowed in the discussion of race, science itself had already established its reputation as "calm and dispassionate," as somehow above its own practice (148).[78]

All told, antebellum discourse about race reflects a degree of informality and a looser standard of scientific warrant for the claims made by theorists than we would normally expect today under the umbrella of science. Nonetheless, the growing professionalization of science during the nineteenth century meant that the race conversation was not a casual one. Instead, it partook of a cultural authority that was developing around the concept of Science, not just as a method of inquiry, but as a means of acquiring the Truth. The importance of print technologies should not be underestimated for spreading the message of racial theorists. Reading was essential to race's dissemination. Though concepts of race get worked out in daily interactions between individuals, the particular form of scientific racism produced in the early nineteenth-century imagines the scrutiny of bodies as a process of reading, a powerful metaphor at the time.

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*Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacie*s (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997) and Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998).

[77] *The Southern Quarterly Review*, 8.15 (July 1845): 148-190. *The Making of America Journal Articles.* U of Michigan. Web. 18 May 2010.

[78] Ibid.

Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz, a Swiss zoologist and geologist, was a leading proponent of the theory of polygenesis. A professor at Harvard from 1848 until his death in 1873, Agassiz's work is important, not only because he was one of the first naturalists to argue for separate creations from a scientific point of view, but also because, as Lee Baker explains, "Agassiz's legacy is not only the statues, schools, streets, and museums in Cambridge [Massachusetts] emblazoned with his name but also the bevy of students who were under his tutelage at Harvard University. He trained virtually all of the prominent U.S. professors of natural history during the second half of the nineteenth century" (16).[79] Agassiz's work had lasting influence on the fields of ethnology, anthropology, and zoology well into the next century. Agassiz came to the United States in 1846. Already a prominent naturalist in Europe, Agassiz was contracted to deliver a series of lectures for the Lowell Institute during the year. He spent the time between his arrival in Boston and the start of his lecture series, traveling the east coast meeting and talking with prominent scientists. When he arrived in Philadelphia, Agassiz was eager to meet with Morton at the Academy of Natural Sciences. He admired Morton's work, marveled at his large collection of crania, and the two became fast friends.

Morton, a noted Philadelphia physician and professor of Anatomy at Pennsylvania Medical College, who amassed a collection of over 1500 human skulls—the world's largest collection—known in the scientific community as "the American Golgotha,"[80] was one of the first theorists of race to employ scientific methodology in his work. Morton began the collection in the 1820s to address the lack of anatomic studies of crania. He published the findings of his work in the 1839, *Crania Americana*. *Crania Americana*, published with 78

[79] Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998).

[80] Morton's collection is now held at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthroplogy.

illustrated plates and a colored map, assembled the measurements of the internal capacity of human skulls, collected mostly in America, and divided into five different categories—the five races described earlier by the German anatomist, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840).[81] Morton's measurements indicated that Caucasian skulls had the largest internal capacity and "Ethiopian" skulls the smallest.[82] This information was used to support the conclusion that skull capacity indicates brain size and that brain size is a fair measure of intelligence, and, therefore, capacity for development and civilization. Morton's findings, though lauded at the time in medical publications such as the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, received greater prominence when they were picked up first by Carl Gustavus Carus (1789-1869) who included Morton's table comparing skull capacity in an 1849 work and later, by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), who also reproduced Morton's table.

The long-lasting and profoundly destructive influence of a work like Gobineau's *Inequality of Human Races* (1853) eclipses the significance of Morton's publication. Nonetheless, Morton's work is an important signpost in the history of race because it points down the path of scientific racism, particularly to the belief in a biological basis for race. Morton begins searching the body for evidence of racial difference. The concept of different races (and, therefore, differences between these races) was nothing new in the 1830s when Morton was collecting and measuring his skulls, but these races were classified differently by different theorists and the source(s) of division were not seen in strictly physical terms.

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[81] Blumenbach divided humans into five racial groups—Caucasians, Mongolians, Malayans, Ethiopians, and Americans.

[82] Morton's results have since been discredited, the accuracy of his methods and his handling of data challenged. See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

Language, culture, and geographical habitation were seen as equally telling classificatory categories.

Morton's *Crania Americana* and its follow-up *Crania Aegyptiaca* influenced Agassiz's stance on the origin and creation of humans, but, perhaps, even more so, Agassiz's experiences in the hotels of Philadelphia shaped, quite markedly, his future attitudes and the science he later produced. Agassiz's revulsion at his first encounter with black people is palpable in the letter he wrote to his mother in December 1846. He describes the black waiters:

> All the domestics at my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. . . . Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away. (qtd. in Wallis 104)[83]

This experience becomes transformative for Agassiz. Just the year prior, in a series of twelve lectures on the "Plan de la Création" in Switzerland, Agassiz had argued for the single human creation moment described by the Christian Bible. After his stay in Philadelphia, however, Agassiz's sensation that African-Americans were not "of the same blood" as Europeans informs his anthropological views. In his subsequent Lowell lectures, Agassiz contradicts his previous support of monogenesis and argues instead for the separate creation of races of humans, which he ultimately defines as separate species. In November 1847, Agassiz speaks in Charleston, South Carolina, declaring the diverse origin of the races and, what is more, insisting that "the brain of the Negro is that of the imperfect brain of a 7 month's infant in the womb of the White"

[83] Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz" *American Art* 9.2 (1995): 38-61. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 May 2010. Part of the original letter from Louis Agassiz to his mother, Rose Mayor Agassiz, Dec. 2 1846, is available, in French, in the Agassiz Papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

(qtd. in Stanton 100). With the publication of three articles in the Unitarian *Christian Examiner* in 1850 and 1851 in which Agassiz argues, first, that animals were created in distinct and separate geographical regions and, second, in "Diversity of the Origin of the Human Race" that human beings were also created in separate, distinct geographical zones which define race, Agassiz's position as one of the country's foremost proponents of the theory of polygenesis was fixed.

Agassiz's description of the black waiters gives early evidence of his overriding belief in Negro inferiority and demonstrates his fear of racial difference. What is particularly significant about the letter, however, is the representation of race that it contains. At the same time Agassiz insists on the difference between himself and the "men of color," on the upset of his former belief in the unity of man, on the "blood" which divides the races, he also dwells, with enormous energy, on the (exaggerated) physical characteristics of the black bodies he sees. Agassiz details the faces, lips, teeth, hair, knees, hands, nails, and palms of the waiters to demonstrate and emphasize their difference from him, a difference he feels so extremely that he marks it, not just once, but through eight physical signifiers of (racial) difference. Yet, as Robyn Wiegman reminds us "the significations attached to the body—the culturally specific, fetishistic attention to skin, hair, breast, brain size, and skull shape, for instance—are not the pre-determined loci of difference, but a deeply problematical and asymmetrical production" (4).[84] The "problematical and asymmetrical" significations of racial difference suggest a threat so menacing to Agassiz that he is eager to put physical distance between himself and the waiters. But more significantly, he combats this perceived threat through classification. Dating from this very first encounter with

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[84] Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995).

"black" people, Agassiz's theory of human creation changes. Henceforth, he will maintain the theory of polygenesis and classify human beings into separate and distinct species. This particular episode makes plain the degree to which scientific theory and the principles which undergird it are influenced by factors outside the purely intellectual, and, more specifically, the way in which classification serves not only to define but also to diffuse the threat posed by difference.

Classification and the categorization of individuals into racial groupings ultimately becomes Agassiz's way of organizing difference, but it is also his means of producing it. He begins by bemoaning the "painful impression" created by challenges to his intellectual convictions. He doubts himself, painfully. This doubt, however, is immediately recouped by an "us" versus "them" position: "they are not of the same blood as us." Agassiz begins to divide "the confraternity of the human type" immediately upon the spot before any "scientific" evidence in support of this classification can be gathered. In fact, it is Agassiz's emotional impression that serves in this case as his scientific evidence. He cannot "repress the feeling" of difference, so he pursues an explanation of what starts as affect. The difference between "us" and "them," moreover, is a difference of "blood." Like the term, "race," "blood" is another signifier whose meaning varies widely, and, like race, it has been used to indicate kinship or belonging to a group. When the concept of "blood" begins to be deployed in the development of this new, scientific form of race, it carries the older meanings of kinship into the equation, but also brings a deeper sense of physicality, earthiness, and mystery. Blood is a physical reminder of mortality. Literally, one cannot live without blood, but it also serves to suggest generative properties; blood is the life force. To invoke the concept of "blood," then, is to bring, unstated, all of these resonances into the conversation and to bring them in unexamined fashion: "they are

not of the same blood as us." Blood adds an invisible difference that sorts people into categories, categories which are indissoluble. One cannot change one's "blood." Linking an irrefutable physical trait, like "blood" to the concept of race is critical to race's potency as an immutable difference.

In the letter to his mother, Agassiz's text performs the very differences which so repel him. Agassiz describes the waiters with animal-like imagery. They have "thick lips" over "grimacing teeth," "wool" in place of hair, and their hands, in particular, are imaged as animal-like. With "their bent knees" and long, clawed hands, the figuration here is clearly ape-like, a comparison that was typical of nineteenth century Ethnology. In *Crania Americana*, Morton depicts African Hottentots as the "nearest approximation to the lower animals . . . The women are represented as even more repulsive in appearance than the men" (90).[85] Brian Wallis explains the context: "In nineteenth century anthropology, blacks were often situated along the evolutionary ladder midway between a classical ideal and the orangutan" (53). The production of Ethnological images depicting the races, such as the drawings reproduced in Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), often represented Africans with exaggerated features—a backwards sloping forehead, forward-jutting jaws, and a large brow. Many of these images were based on the work of Dutch taxonomist, Peter Camper (1722-1789) who developed a method of measuring "facial angle." Camper maintained that the facial angle revealed an individual's place along a line of progress from animals to humans. Camper describes his technique of measuring the proportions of the profile, from the forward most point of the forehead to the forward most point of the jaw: "When I made these lines incline forwards, I obtained the face of an antique, backwards of a negroe; still more backwards, the lines which mark an ape, a dog, a snipe, &c"

[85] Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana* (Phila.: John Pennington, 1839).

(qtd. in Wallis 53). In Camper's depictions there is a clear line of relation from animal to African.

The physical features that Agassiz focuses on—hair, lips, hands—would have been familiar signifiers of difference to antebellum Americans from "blackface" minstrel shows, where white performers would dress as slaves, blacken their faces, and perform "Negro" music and dance, though these signs may have been less familiar to Swiss-born Agassiz and his European mother.[86] Just as the minstrel show appropriates African-American music, dance, and speech for its own purpose, Agassiz's letter appropriates African-American bodies as exemplars of racial difference, as products of reading. The fact that race could be performed as a series of reproducible signs—blackface, dialect, costumes, music, and dance—in the heyday of American minstrel shows, from the 1830s-'50s, points to the fact that race inheres in these signs of difference and is recognized within them. That is, to maintain its potency and perceived substance, the supposed differences of race must be repeated again and again, such as in the blackface performance. Yet, in Agassiz's text, the waiters are not actors on a stage, but actual individuals employed by a Philadelphia hotel. Agassiz's reading of black bodies performs difference. The African-American men Agassiz describes, unlike the blackface performers, do not have "wool" for hair, or claw-like hands, yet their bodies are read in this degrading way. For Agassiz, reading becomes the means through which difference is perceived and, once perceived, difference structures, not only his reaction on an affective level, but his racial theories, as well.

[86] For a compelling account of race and the minstrel show, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993). See also, Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1986).

The repetitious nature of racial discourse can be profitably analyzed through the notion of the "performative," described by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*[87] and revised by Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.[88] Austin considers occasions where speech is more than descriptive, but an action instead. Such utterances constitute in the act of speech. Butler extends Austin's concept of the performative to address materiality and nonverbal utterances in an evolving theory she calls "performativity." Butler argues that language and discourse produce the materiality that it claims to describe:

> The body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified* as *prior*. This signification produces an *effect* of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which *precedes* its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification. (30; italics in original; *Bodies That Matter*)

This precise phenomenon is apparent in Agassiz's letter, where the very features he isolates, come into being as raced through his articulation of them.[89]

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[87] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* 1955. Eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999).

[88] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Perhaps Butler's most important revision of Austin is to move away from the notion of the performative as an act of a particular speaker as agent, and to move toward an understanding of "performativity as a specific modality of power as discourse" (187). Butler sees the performative as successful only to the degree that it performs within discourse a repetition of norms authorized within that discursive community.

[89] Neither Austin, Butler, nor I, would suggest that language acts alone to shape the materiality of bodies. Austin notes, from the first, that performatives rely upon circumstances that are "*appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words" (8; italics in original). Butler discusses perfomatives as succeeding "provisionally" because "that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.* What this means, is that a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized" (227; italics in original; *Bodies That Matter*).

Repetition is the key to the discursive and rhetorical success of race. Agassiz describes the waiters using animal comparisons and placing special emphasis on physical features which had come to carry the discursive weight of race. Agassiz's racial descriptors become performative as they repeat or cite these previous articulations of race, in the process, regulating future productions of race. In Agassiz letter, then, we read Agassiz's framing of his racial encounter, but we also read, between the lines, Morton's portrayal of African Hottentots, Camper's illustrations of African facial angles, the blackface performances of minstrel shows, and countless other discursive depictions of racial difference. Citation of prior articulations of race, establishes and maintains an authority attached to those articulations, each time they are deployed. Furthermore, his production of race as defining and frightening influence the methods of scientific inquiry he will pursue and the conclusions he will draw in his future work on race. Thus, Agassiz's letter, absurd as it is in its depiction of black men—who acted as servants in the hotel and posed no threat whatsoever to Agassiz—as animals, and difference itself as threatening and fearful, in this discursive economy, reads as plausible, not as outrageous. It even reads as intellectually questing, open to rethinking and the challenging of Agassiz's prior assumptions about human unity. Certainly, Agassiz's mother would have read it in these intellectually complementary ways. What becomes obscured in these readings is the degree to which Agassiz's depictions of African-Americans cite earlier representations of race and, importantly, the degree to which race as a performative does not "work," would not succeed, *without* these repetitions.

Lastly, in Agassiz's letter we see the construction of naturalist as observer. The fact of Agassiz's gaze is just as crucial to the version of race his text produces as is the nominal content of the letter. Agassiz's gaze structures difference as at once captivating and fear-inducing: "I

could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away." Thus, the difference Agassiz figures as race is visible, fearful, and best negotiated at a distance, exactly the set of experiences available to Mrs. Agassiz as she reads her son's letter.

In such a way, at the very moment invisible aspects of race are being established, ethnologists are simultaneously emphasizing race in visible terms. That is, even though ethnologists insist that each race embodies a set of "invisible," unalterable physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics that are inheritable by offspring, they also insist that race is a visible quantity. Skin color comes to bear the burden of this simultaneously visible/invisible category. For, the very visibility of race makes concrete the "invisible" characteristics each race is supposed to embody. Thus, Agassiz's commentary points to a critical reductiveness that occurs in order to represent "race." Race can be made "real" through visible traits like skin color, facial features, eye color, hair type, etc. Yet, these visible traits alone do not say much about the individual who displays them, unless the physical traits themselves are seen as representative of other, more telling, invisible traits. These invisible traits tell the story of "race," of "blood," the story of supposedly immutable intellectual and moral characteristics that are marked on the body precisely as skin color, facial features, eye color, hair type, etc. Thus, race comes to be seen.

Just one example of the visible, scrutinized, raced body is found in a set of daguerreotypes produced for Agassiz. In 1850, Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, son of one of South Carolina's first families, an expert on American paleontology and an avid collector of scientific specimens, assisted Agassiz in creating a photographic record of African body types. Gibbes arranged for a local daguerreotypist, Joseph Zealy, to record a group of slaves' images. Gibbes himself recorded the names of the slaves, their African origins, and their owner's names. They produced 15 daguerreotypes in two formats. The first group of images show the slaves standing,

naked. They are photographed from the front, side, and rear. The images show body shape and emphasize posture and proportion. The second group of daguerreotypes are of the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women slaves. These images focus on the shape of the head in phrenological fashion. In each of the daguerreotypes, which purport to be scientific studies of racial difference, we see the production of race as visible and as (exotic) spectacle. What we do not see, but what is equally part of this formulation, is the seeing, but unseen viewer. Wallis suggests the connection between the exotic and the seductive; the black body becomes a spectacle to be viewed, an exoticized pleasure to be consumed, but also a difference to be derided, disavowed, and denounced. He develops the significance of the daguerreotypes: "The emphasis on the body occurs at the expense of speech; the subject is already positioned, known, owned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as silent; in short, it is ignored. In other words, the typological photograph is a form of representational colonialism" (Wallis 54). The daguerreotypes perform a kind of colonial conquest in the field of representation. It is important to recognize that the images are not neutral, precisely because they purport to be so.

In similar fashion, the textual construction of race we find in the work of ethnologists like Agassiz, Morton, Nott, and Gliddon is not neutral science either. Nott, in particular, is guilty of simply inventing the evidence he sought. For instance, Nott insisted that blacks and whites were separate species. His evidence for this was the statement that mulattos were infertile, which he maintained as fact. Of course, no such infertility exists between any human "races," nor was there reason in the nineteenth century to believe that it did. Nonetheless, Nott's claims were made vociferously and they received wide attention, despite the fact that there was no scientific evidence to support his beliefs. Whereas Nott's work was often based on mere repetition, other researchers, like Morton, produced data to substantiate their claims. Morton's cranial

measurements were extensive and carefully recorded. He did, however, make crucial methodological errors in not considering how height or gender might impact upon cranial capacity and in throwing out aberrant samples. Though Morton's results have been thoroughly discredited by twentieth century scientists like Stephen Jay Gould, Gould clears Morton of knowledgeable, intentional distortion of his findings.[90] Notwithstanding, Morton's attitudes and expectations clearly informed the accuracy of his results. Morton himself acknowledges the social/cultural pressures which influenced his work. He writes to Nott that he had understated the strength of his views on polygenesis in *Crania Americana* because he "feared they would lead to some controversy with the clergy" (Morton l).[91] Surprisingly, this expected controversy never materialized and, consequently, Morton advised Nott that he felt the clergy would "finally concede all" on the notion of separate creations (l).[92] Popular opinion certainly conceded the notion of polygenesis. Horsman argues that the "differentiation into superior and inferior races had gone so far that by 1850 practically all of the most important writers on race in America believed that there had been separate Creations of the different races, and though many periodicals tried to straddle the fence on the issue, practically all gave wide publicity to polygenetic views" (157).

The claim of white supremacy was an even easier sell to white Americans and it often relied on a notion of natural order. *The Southern Quarterly Review*, an influential Southern

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[90] See Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man.*

[91] Samuel George Morton, "To Josiah Nott." 29 Jan. 1850. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researchers Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geohraphical, Philological, and Biblical History: Illustrated by Selections from the Inedited Papers of Samuel George Morton, M.D. (Late President of the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia,) and by Additional Contributions from Prof. L. Agassiz LL. D.; W. Usher, M.D.; and Prof. H. S. Patterson, M.D.* 7th ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott Grambo & Co., 1855). l. *Making of America*. 2005. 27 May 2010. Web.

[92] Ibid.

magazine which widely covered matters of race in the 1840s and 50s, published authors on both sides of the creation question, but all seemed to agree on the subordination of blacks "because of natural, unalterable, and eternal inferiority."[93] Samuel Cartwright (1793-1862), a New Orleans physician and professor at the University of Louisiana, declared that the Negro was a "slave by nature" and detailed supposed physical differences between blacks and whites which included blood that was "blacker than the white man's" and a brain that was smaller.[94] Yet, Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), was, perhaps, the most influential of all the racial tracts published in the 1850s, possibly because it was so polemical.

Types of Mankind draws together essays from several of the leading proponents of polygenesis—including Agassiz, William Usher, excerpts from Morton, a memoir of Morton by Henry Patterson, and, of course, essays by Nott and George Gliddon. The tone throughout is imperious, learned, and, most of all, "scientific," in the sense that the research is presented as examples of the scientific method, though the claims are often based on mere assertion or citation. The text includes an epigraph from Byron that highlights Nott and Gliddon's awareness of the influence of their work on, not only the developing field of Ethnology, but the degree to which *Types* might influence political and cultural contexts, as well: "Words are things; and a

[93] *Southern Quarterly Review*, 21 (Jan. 1852): 175.

[94] Samuel A. Cartwright, *De Bow's Review*, 11 (July 1851): 65. Cartwright was also considered to be an authority on diseases which seemed only to afflict Negroes. For instance, in 1851, Cartwright identifies two diseases specific to Negroes: "Drapetomania," an illness which causes slaves to run away, and "Dysaethesia Aethiopica," a disease which causes troubling behavior known as "rascality." The slave so afflicted was liable to "do much mischief, which appears as if intentional, but is mostly owing to the stupidness of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease. Thus, they break, waste and destroy everything they handle,--abuse horses and cattle,--tear, burn or rend their own clothing, and, paying no attention to the rights of property, steal others, to replace what they have destroyed. They wander about at night, and keep in a half nodding sleep during the day. They slight their work,--cut up corn, cane, cotton or tobacco when hoeing it, as if for pure mischief. They raise disturbances with their overseers and fellow-servants without cause or motive, and seem to be insensible to pain when subjected to punishment." See Samuel A. Cartwright, "Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race." *De Bow's Review* 10 (Feb. 1851): 119-128. Cartwright's "diseases" may be more familiar to present-day readers as signs of slave resistance; Cartwright's confusion is almost laughable except for the realization that it is his deeply held belief in black inferiority that made him identify signs of resistance, independence, and intelligence among African-Americans as pathological.

small drop of ink, / Falling, like dew upon a thought, produces / That which makes thousands, perhaps, millions, think." The epigraph suggests the potency of language and its power to alter the conditions of our lives. Its inclusion at the beginning of *Types* implies a hope that the text will provoke the thought of "thousands, perhaps, millions," but it also underscores the important recognition that the literary world of imagination and ideas often provides the imaginative constructs for scientific research, just as reading serves as the expressive framework for the discussion of race.[95]

Nott's contributions to *Types* make many of the same arguments that other proponents of polygenesis make—that humans are the products of several, distinct creations, rather than one Biblical creation moment, that each creation involved a particular race endowed with specific characteristics and capacities, and that these racial differences are natural and permanent. He takes the argument one step further to insist that the races are also separate species:

> The races of mankind . . . the Jew, the Celt, the Iberian, the Mongol, the Negro, the Polynesian, the Australian, the American Indian, can be regarded in no other light than as distinct, or as amalgamations of very proximate, *species.* When, therefore, two of these species are placed beside each other for comparison, the anatomist is at once struck by their strong contrast; and his task is narrowed down to a description of those well-marked types which are known to be permanent. The form and capacity of the skull, the contour of the face, many parts of the skeleton, the peculiar development of muscles, the hair and skin, all present strong points of contrast. (Nott 411; italics in original)[96]

[95] See Thomas Kuhn, "Metaphor in Science" *The Road Since Structure* Eds. James Conant and John Haugeland. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000). and Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1880-1960*. (London: MacMillan, 1982).

[96] Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researchers Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geohraphical, Philological, and Biblical History: Illustrated by Selections from the Inedited Papers of Samuel George Morton, M.D. (Late President of the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia,) and by Additional Contributions from Prof. L. Agassiz LL. D.; W. Usher, M.D.; and Prof. H. S. Patterson, M.D.* 7th ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott Grambo & Co., 1855). l. *Making of America*. 2005. Web. 27 May 2010.

Nott's language is forceful. He presupposes an educated, "white" reader and refers regularly to this group using "us" and "our." Horsman details *Type*'s reception and its widespread acceptance. For the most part, contemporary opposition to Nott and his views came from the Northeast and largely from the clergy. They objected to Nott's claims of polygenesis far more than they opposed his belief in natural, racial differences (Horsman 148-52).

Part of Nott's success, on a rhetorical level, is his thoroughness in providing detail, even if he has little or no scientific evidence to support the material he cites. In the above excerpt, Nott elaborates "strong points of contrast" in the bodies of the different races and lists multiple, physical differences, whether there are any actual differences or not. In another instance, Nott forestalls thorough investigation of a topic, but informs the reader that he has no need of more information than is provided: "Our limits do not permit a detailed analysis, nor is such necessary, as the few prominent facts we shall present are quite sufficient for the purpose in hand, and will at once be permitted by every reader who is at all competent to pursue this discussion" (182). Interestingly, in this construction, "competent" readers have little need of information and find themselves in complete agreement with Nott. The text allows no space for dissent and defines competence as agreement. In this case, the "ideal reader" constructed by the text proves to be Nott himself.

Over and over throughout the text, Nott makes overt rhetorical gestures to indicate the reader's tacit agreement with the argument presented. For instance, see the following claim: "The authors confidently trust, that the antiquity of Negro races, no less than the *permanence of Negro types* . . . are questions now satisfactorily set at rest in the minds of lettered and scientific readers" (Nott 271; italics in original). Nott's tactic is certainly not novel, or indeed, even remarkable. It is a familiar authorial technique to encourage the reader's acquiescence. What

deserves mention, however, is the fact that Nott links "lettered" and "scientific" readers. Not only does this rhetorical maneuver class "scientific" readers with those already possessing the cultural literacy referred to in the term "lettered," but it also places Nott's own text within this class by virtue of its culturally literate readers. *Types* derives a kind of authority from such inferences, especially to the degree that the inference is not scrutinized by readers. When Nott addresses the reader directly, he does so to influence the reader toward his own conclusions: "Reader! Let us imagine ourselves standing upon the highest peak in Abyssinia; and that our vision could extend over the whole continent, embracing south, east, north, and west: what *tableaux-vivants* would be presented to the eye, no less than to the mind!" (Nott 191). Nott's words recall Caldwell's 1811 "mount of vision"; the language of vision predominates this discussion of race, as well. But what gets "seen" in this excerpt is Africans living in "irredeemable ignorance and savagism" (Nott 191). Race becomes a visual indicator of human worth—one's innate capacity for civilization, learning, and development.

As surely as *Types* constructs its own "ideal reader," it also constructs its author. Not only does Nott assume a certain writing posture as author of the text, but he also suggests that science itself is the true author of *Types*, and, most importantly, of the data itself: "Science . . . can make 'these dry bones speak'" (Nott 267). For Nott, written texts reveal the past in discernable ways. He implies that we can only know the "truth" of the past, by reading it in written texts, but as the written record is limited, we can have only partial knowledge of the past. Science, however, holds the answer to this lost, unreadable past:

> There was . . . a time before all history. During that blank period, man taught himself to *write;* and until he had recorded his thoughts and events in some form of writing—hieroglyphics, to wit—his existence prior to that act, if otherwise certain, is altogether unattainable by us, save through induction. The historical vicissitudes of each human type are, therefore, unknown to us until the age of

> written record began in each geographical centre. . . *Anatomy*, however, possesses its own laws independently of history. (Nott 414; italics in original)

The study of human anatomy becomes the "ideal text" because, unlike written texts, anatomy is no partial record. The body will tell its own story, its own history; Nott implies that he can read the text of anatomy, accurately providing an account of the past.

Nott's historical account involves strong racial attitudes. Among the Egyptian visual texts that Nott writes about are "numberless portraits of Negro races. Hundreds of them are represented as slaves, as prisoners of war, as fugitives, or slain in large battle scenes" (253). "Time," Nott maintains, "as every one can now see, has effected no alteration, even by transfer to the New World, upon African types (save through amalgamation) for 3400 years downwards" (Nott 255). Nott asserts that Africans are inferior and presents exploitation of them as natural, even desirable. He claims that neither time, nor education, nor better living conditions can do anything to improve the lot of the African "type." More disturbingly, Nott repeatedly compares African people to animals. He references Agassiz's claim: "Prof. Agassiz also asserts, that a peculiar conformation characterizes the brain of an adult Negro. Its development never goes beyond that developed in the Caucasian in boyhood; and, besides other singularities, it bears, in several particulars, a marked resemblance to the brain of the orang-outan. The Professor kindly offered to demonstrate those cerebral characters to me, but I was unable, during his stay in Mobile, to procure the brain of a Negro" (Nott 415).

Putting aside the irony apparent in the scholarly generosity and mannerliness with which Nott and Agassiz treat *each other* while they compare their fellow human beings to apes, in this excerpt, Nott suggests a scientific justification for the comparison, but does not actually include it in the text. One can almost feel his disappointment in being unable to "procure the brain of a Negro." He goes on to detail multiple supposed differences between the bodies of Africans and

Europeans. The African body shows differences in the head, feet, spine, ribs, buttocks, pelvis, scapulae, muscles of the legs and arms, and the abdomen, and breasts of the "Negress" (Nott 415). The "coarse and ugly" African face also betrays racial difference, Nott maintains (Burmeister qtd. in Nott 415).[97] Again, Nott's evidence for racial difference involves citation of another ethnologist's claims. Where Nott does include his own "evidence," he offers a "comparison of crania" and declares "it may be safely assumed, as a general law, that where important peculiarities exist in crania, others equally tangible belong to the same organism" (414). As the head indicates, so does the body, Nott asserts. He claims that the body is the outward manifestation of the inner matter and that the internal capacity reflects the outer body, in a kind of mutual reflection: "In a word, the whole of Africa, south of 10° N. lat., shows a succession of human beings with intellects as dark as their skins, and with a cephalic conformation that renders all expectation of their future melioration as an Utopian dream, philanthropical, but somewhat senile" (Nott 185). Here we see that blackness operates as a motif indicating mental dimness and Otherness, among other qualities.[98] Nott insists that the position of Africans cannot be improved. In this way, he absolves Americans of responsibility for slavery and presents it as the natural condition of Africans and their descendants. As an additional rhetorical assault, Nott casts any readerly doubt as senility. Those who disagree are not only mistaken, in Nott's view, but mentally incapable.

Thus far we have seen that Nott places great value on the scientist's ability to read accurately from written texts and, he insists, from the body itself. In the following passage, Nott

[97] Nott describes African facial features by including a long excerpt from Dr. Hermann Burmeister, zoology professor at the University of Halle.

[98] Toni Morrison would, no doubt, view Nott's reference to darkness as an example of what she calls "Africanism." See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

reiterates his view that written texts inscribe the past, but he also complicates the picture. This time Nott conflates the production of written texts with the production of racial difference. That is, in this passage, we literally see Nott inscribe racial difference as a function of writing, of making texts. He laments that all ancient cultures didn't leave written records of their anatomical features: "Had every nation of antiquity emulated Egypt, and perpetuated the portraits of its own people with a chisel, it would now be evident to the reader that *each type of mankind* . . . is by nature as indelibly permanent as the stone-pages upon which Egyptians . . . have cut their several iconographies (Nott 246; italics in original). Nott compares the permanence of stone carvings to the permanence of racial types, suggesting that racial difference is natural. Implicit in this comparison is the supposition that texts of various kinds, stone-pages or "raced" bodies themselves, can be read by an astute reader and that reading is, essentially, a discernment of difference. Nott suggests that he himself is an astute reader and consequently presents his reading of racial types. But Nott's license to read the text of racial difference has its limitations. In order to disseminate his views, Nott must produce his own text. In so doing, Nott's text is also opened up to the interpretation of an astute reader. In the above excerpt, we see Nott direct his own reader to the conclusions he wants the reader to find: that race is natural and unalterable. Still, Nott's heavy-handedness in pointing the reader to the "evident" conclusion, uncovers the potential unreliability of the reader. What if the reader is not persuaded by the stone-pages which inscribe race?

Science steps in to mediate this unreliability between reader and text, the risk posed by reading. Nott declares: "Man can invent nothing in science or religion but falsehood; and all the truths which he discovers are but facts or laws which have emanated from the Creator. All science, therefore, may be regarded as a revelation from Him" (61). Authorized by God,

revealing the "truth" of creation, Science emerges as the single, legitimate means of interpreting the natural world: "If we wish to predict the future, we must ascertain those great fundamental laws of humanity to which all human passions and human thoughts must ultimately be subject. We must know universal as well as individual man. These are questions upon which science alone has the right to pronounce" (Nott 54). Science, then, reduces the threat reading presents, reducing multiple, possible interpretations to those following from a single paradigm.

Science may not have all of the answers, Nott concedes, but it is reliably steady: "the laws governing the phenomena of Nature, if as yet often inscrutable, are nevertheless perdurable" (431). Nott's emphasis in this passage is the inalterability of natural processes. He makes the argument that human types or races have existed as distinct categories, species, even, since time immemorial. But what is also at play in his statement is the "inscrutability" of natural law. In Nott's formulation, nature is unchanging, even if mysterious. The supposed fixedness of nature is intended to cover over its fathomless qualities. Yet, the supposition is not entirely convincing. For one thing, if the natural phenomena Nott describes were so "perdurable," they would be less difficult to understand. But more to the point, Nott's formulation of Nature as "inscrutable" reopens the question of interpretation and the more or less determining role of the interpreter. Gone is the surety of Anatomy as definitive text. Gone is the notion of Science as revelation from the Creator. Gone, too, is Nott's easy assumption of interpretive authority. Either the texts of Nature, human crania and other "dry bones[,] speak" clearly, or they do not. Nott's argument has relied upon the claim of self-evidence: human crania tell the truth of the body and the person within. But despite ethnologists's insistence on the self-evidence of the body, the practical study of the natural sciences always involves a certain deficit of information and consequent hypothesizing.

Thus, the concept of reading emerges out of the discourse around race as a principle which helps to bridge the gap between scientific data and the unknown. In other words, reading becomes a strategy for coping with conceptual breaks between scientific data as it is collected and the conclusions which are ultimately drawn from it. Reading can serve as an organizing metaphor here because reading, like the scientific method of data collection and hypothesizing, is also a multi-step process that involves confronting an unfamiliar text, gathering syntactical data, interpreting it, and ultimately comprehending it. In this way, reading offered a metaphor that worked to familiarize the scientific method. The most prominent features of the reading process and the reader's role within it become the expressive model for talking about, advocating, and, indeed, inscribing race as a performative.

By representing himself as a reader of texts and his scientific method as the more familiar process of reading, Nott can insist on the authority of his interpretations while giving nominal recognition to Nature's inscrutability. Because as a reader, Nott's interpretive process is familiar, it goes unscrutinized. The comparison between the scientific method as Nott practiced it and the reading of unfamiliar texts may not be an apt comparison, but it is one that serves, on a rhetorical level, to liken the two processes. Once scientific observation and reading have been aligned, Nott's conclusions seem to follow from a familiar process, as well. Thus, they don't bear scrutiny the way they might if the methodology that produced the conclusions was perceived as unfamiliar. The scientific method was fast gaining acceptance and cultural authority in the early nineteenth century, but it was not already assured of prominence.

When Nott speaks of Egyptian "stone pages," he is looking to establish authority for his interpretation of races as permanent, distinct groupings of people. Nott's claims gather their perceived strength through his rhetoric, not his scientific evidence. By presenting his own

methodology as if it were the conventional process of reading, Nott does several things at once. He establishes a scientific methodology as familiar and recognizable, and, therefore, trustworthy. He gives structure and order to this process, as if the drawing of conclusions from scientific data were akin to inferences made while reading. He presents himself as the trustworthy practitioner of this science. And he writes race as an interpretation of anatomical texts on the order of the already commonplace process of reading prose. Ultimately, this use of reading as a metaphor for his own process—in effect, concealing the gaps of his demonstrable knowledge and obscuring his fabrication of race—allows Nott to insist on race as "natural" and "permanent" while appearing to simply draw these conclusions as if they follow from his data.

If antebellum scientific discourse produces the raced body as a text, then reading is the skeleton of that body. As much as reading becomes a way of representing race—familiarizing and disseminating racialist thought—making "the dry bones speak," it is also the framework by which nineteenth-century notions of race are structured and organized. Reading operates as the discernment of difference, the means through which race can be perceived and performed. Poe's travel narrative, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) anticipates this conjunction of bodies and texts around the topics of race and reading. Published sixteen years before *Types*, *Pym* plays out the naturalization of race through reading and examines inscriptions of race in tablets very similar to the Egyptian stone-pages Nott so eagerly reads. Yet Poe moves the question of reading away from strictly literary forms and explores the consequences of reading and readers in bodies made readable by the text(s) of race.

Threatening Blackness: Poe and the Restricted Reader

Of all the "visions . . . of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears" that make up the mental wanderings of a young Pym, eager for a life of adventure on the high seas, and, ultimately, the incident-packed plot line of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), perhaps one of the most pivotal scenes is Pym and the Native American "half-breed" Dirk Peters' descent of the soapstone cliff on the island of Tsalal (Poe 459). Not only is this scene interesting as a rendering of what Poe described as the "spirit of perverseness," that "unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*," but it is also key to understanding the play of power and powerlessness in *Pym* (350; italics in original).[99]

His "imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depth yet to be descended," Pym becomes more and more frightened to continue down the side of the cliff to where Peters is waiting for him below, until:

> At length arrived that crisis of fancy, so fearful in all similar cases, the crisis to which we begin to anticipate the feelings with which we *shall* fall—to picture to ourselves the sickness, and dizziness, and the last struggle, and the half swoon, and the final bitterness of the rushing and headlong descent. And now I found these fancies creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding upon me in fact. (553; italics in original)[100]

Against his own interest, Pym lets go of his hold upon the make-shift rope: "For one moment my fingers clutched convulsively upon their hold, while, with the movement, the faintest

[99] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) 348-355. For another treatment of the perverse see Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse."

[100] Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) 429-563. Subsequent references are to this edition.

possible idea of ultimate escape wandered, like a shadow, through my mind—in the next my whole soul was pervaded with a *longing to fall*; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. I let go at once my grasp" (Poe 553; italics in original). For a moment, Pym remains suspended there, but then "there came a spinning of the brain; a shrill-sounding and phantom voice screamed within my ears; a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure stood immediately beneath me and, sighing, I sunk down with a bursting heart and plunged within its arms" (Poe 554). Luckily, Peters catches him from below and Pym remains unharmed.

Poe's fascination with the perverse signifies his interest in power dynamics, particularly in overthrows or shifts of power. At the core of *Pym*, for instance, are questions about how power works, how it can be undermined from within or seized from without. *Pym* stages revolt, allowing Pym to "try on" the role of the subjugated as if in a kind of play-acting. When the scene ends, Pym will be restored to his "rightful" position of supremacy and returned to the "civilized" world, but for the moment of play-acting, encapsulated within the descent, Pym falls, falls, falls, sighing and sinking into the arms of "a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure," reminiscent of the "black-skin warriors" of Tsalal, as well as the black, African-American slaves that populate and threaten the order of the antebellum Southern world and psyche.[101] In this

[101] Recent trends in Poe criticism have recognized the novel's relation to the subjects of race and slavery, though there is little agreement on Poe's political position with regard to these issues. Many critics, myself among them, see Poe as a proslavery writer, but exactly what his racial attitudes were and how they influenced his writing and life becomes more difficult to reconstruct. For a discussion of the problematics of Poe and race, see Theresa Goddu, *Gothic America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 73-80. John Carlos Rowe and Joan Dayan were among the first to contend that race is a crucial theme in Poe's work. Terence Whalen argues that Poe exemplifies "average racism" for his time and place, but maintains that Poe stayed away from specific pronouncements on slavery in order to guard his marketshare. John Carlos Rowe, Dana Nelson, David Leverenz, and J. Gerald Kennedy, in their respective arguments, make the case for reading a degree of intended racism in Poe's work and a degree of racialism in his texts that goes beyond intention. Ed White, more recently, insists that in reading Poe we remain aware of texts "as projects of cultural praxis," as "attempts to transform the world (even if that means transforming our understanding)" (105). He maintains that the context of racialism in which Poe wrote is more than context, but the very matter of his text. See Rowe, "Poe, Antebellum Slavery and Modern Criticism" *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations* Ed. Richard Kopley (Durham: North Carolina UP, 1992) 117-38, and ''Edgar Allan Poe's Imperial Fantasy and the American Frontier,'' *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* Eds. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001) 75–105; Dayan, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves"

suspended moment, Pym experiences overthrow and loss of power. The placement of the cliff scene in the novel (after the natives have killed the crew of the *Jane Guy*) is important. Pym has undergone a displacement of power. Where once, the crew of the ship were, seemingly, in command, now the "black-skin warriors" have supremacy. The cliff scene performs the psychic consequences of the overthrow. It plays out a fantasy of defeat at the hands of the oppressed Other.

Yet, Poe dwells on Pym's anticipation of the fall, rather than his actual discomfiture because Poe is not interested in examining the psychology of the defeated, but of the powerful, and the possibility of defeat from within. By dramatizing the *experience* of defeat, but preserving Pym from any lasting harm, in this incident, at least, the novel allows Pym to explore an alternate subject position—that of the subjugated—and yet the experience remains a game of play-acting. When Pym comes to himself, safe in the arms of Peters, his companion, Pym feels himself "a new being" (Poe 554). Shortly after Pym and Peters reach the bottom of the cliff, they are rushed by several islanders. They fight and the islanders are killed, "leaving [Pym and Peters] completely masters of the field" (Poe 555). Pym's subject position has been restored to the category of "masters."

What a close reading of this scene reveals is that *Pym* enacts the violence that maintains the slave system and performs the logic of oppression, where one is always either (and both) oppressor/oppressed. Questions of power, and fear of the loss of power, are the central problems

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American Literature 66 (1994): 239-73; Whalen, ''Average Racism: Poe, Slavery, and the Wages of Literary Nationalism,'' *Romancing the Shadow* Eds. Kennedy and Weissberg 3-40; Nelson, *The Word in Black and White Reading ''Race'' in American Literature, 1638–1867* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) 90–108; Leverenz, ''Spanking the Master: Mind–Body Crossings in Poe's Sensationalism,'' *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* Ed. Kennedy (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); Kennedy, '''Trust No Man': Poe, Douglass, and the Culture of Slavery,'' *Romancing the Shadow* Eds. Kennedy and Weissberg 253; White, "The Ourang-Outang Situation." *College Literature* 30.3 (2003): 88-108.

around which *Pym* revolves, and these concerns do not remain neatly contained within strictly political categories or represented as discrete literary motifs. Rather, the movement of power—the shift of power from one hand to another by means of violence, or the maintenance of power by means of ideological control—pulsates through *Pym* in multiple ways. By considering the ways reading is depicted and how race is figured in *Pym*, we look, ultimately, at Poe's experiments in how power works. What we discover is that anxiety about the loss of power is depicted as a threatening blackness which, through a twist of racialist psychology, is contained by restricting and displacing the act of reading.

Reading as Foreclosure

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym establishes the difficulties of interpretation early in the tale. In the beginning of the second chapter, the narrator alerts his readers: "In no affairs of mere prejudice, *pro* or *con*, do we deduce inferences with entire certainty, even from the most simple data" (Poe 440). This statement proves true in the rest of Pym's narrative, especially when confronted with data that are anything but simple or familiar. *Pym* is a confrontation between the fantastic and the everyday world of the reader. In creating an imaginary voyage that purports to be the "real" narrative of Pym's journeys in the South Seas, Poe troubles the dividing line between fiction and nonfiction. "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" was first published in installments by the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837. Originally written as a first-person narrative under Poe's name, when it came out in a single volume in 1838 as the work of the fictional Arthur Gordon Pym, Poe needed to craft an explanation for the "discrepancy" in authorship. He added a preface which described the work as the collaboration of both Poe and

the fictional Pym. The preface, ostensibly written by Pym, explains that Mr. Poe, hearing of Pym's adventures and his reluctance to write an account of his travels himself, offers to write a narrative based on Pym's journey. Because of the fantastic quality of Pym's story, Poe publishes the work as fiction. Thus, *Pym* is the tale of an imaginary voyage described as a real travel narrative put before the public originally as a fiction.

Poe's intentional blurring of the fictional and non-fictional was quite successful. Kevin Hayes recounts the multiple misunderstandings *Pym* spawned. Some readers found the narrative unconvincing because they took it as a travel narrative and found it too-evidently fictionalized. Others understood that the narrative was intended as fiction, but believed that Arthur Pym was a real person trying to deceive readers with a preposterous tale disguised as truth. Still others perceived both the narrator and narrative as fictions, but doubted Poe's authorship (Hayes 66-67).[102] These various (mis)readings are not simply the result of the careless reading habits of unsophisticated readers, for Poe's narrative deliberately plays with the conventions of travel narratives and readerly expectations. To begin with, the very genre of the text under discussion was not firmly established for readers. *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, the New York *Evening Post*, and the New York *Albion* were among those papers which reviewed *Pym* as an imaginary voyage. They compared Poe's text (unfavorably) to other well-known imaginary voyages, like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, More's *Utopia*, and Robert Patlock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins*. The British *Monthly Review*, on the other hand, treated *Pym* in a column called "Novels of the Month" and faulted it for its lack of a moral and as an "*out and out* romance" (Hayes 67-68). Depending on the forum in which readers were first familiarized with *Pym*, they

[102] Kevin Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000). For the reactions of contemporary readers, see also, Richard Kopley, "Readers Write: Nineteenth-Century Annotations in Copies of the First American Edition of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Nineteenth-Century Literature* 55.3 (Dec. 2000) : 399-408.

may have gone to the text with certain generic expectations suggested by the review they had read.[103]

One confounded expectation of almost all readers is surely Pym's authoring of the "Preface." By the 1830s, readers had come to expect that introductory material would be written by an author, an editor, or sometimes a patron, but not by a character of the narrative to follow. Pym's appearance outside the boundaries of the, to readers, recognizably fictional portions of the text, disrupts narrative conventions, but more tellingly disturbs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction from which "fictional" texts establish their scope and limits. The fictional Pym's presence in the preface is not the only violation of convention in the preface, however. For, Poe also appears in the preface. Pym refers to Poe, "lately editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*" and his role in encouraging Pym to write an account of his journey: "He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common-sense of the public—insisting with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth" (Poe 432). Yet, the circumstances referred to here are entirely fictional. Pym does not exist, despite the fact that the preface suggests that he does, and Poe does exist, despite the fact that the preface suggests he engaged in wholly fictional conversations and dealings.

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[103] James Machor's helpful "Fiction and Informed Reading" suggests that nineteenth-century readers were educated in interpretive conventions by the reviewers of literary texts. See Machor, "Fiction and Informed Reading in Early Nineteenth-Century America." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47.3 (Dec. 1992): 320-48; see also Machor, "Historical Hermeneutics and Antebellum Fiction: Gender, Response Theory, and Interpretive Contexts" *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* Ed. James L. Machor. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1993) 54-84. For more, specifically about Poe and his relation to print culture, see Theresa Goddu, "Poe, Sensationalism, and Slavery" *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* Ed. Kevin Hayes (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002).

Moreover, the preface's very conformity to other conventional aspects of prefatory remarks causes more readerly confusion. Readers who may have been willing to read the entire preface and narrative as fictional, may have found a stumbling block in the preface's matter-of-fact tone and characteristic content. Pym speaks of his inadequacies as a writer, his fear that the document before the reader may not convey the entirety he intends, and his hesitance to bring it before the public at all. Only after the urging of the *Southern Literary Messenger's* editor and the subsequent publication and success of the first portion of his narrative, can Pym be persuaded to undertake the composition at all. This apology for the failings of the text that follows, the explanation of why the text is made public, had by the 1830s become conventional postures in an author's preface and, hence, read as non-fiction.

Readers themselves find a place in Pym's preface. He explains that after Mr. Poe's publication of a portion of the narrative as fiction, "the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as fable, and several letters were sent to Mr. P.'s address, distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary. I thence concluded that the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity, and that I had consequently little to fear on the score of popular incredulity" (Poe 433). Here, Pym creates a kind of readerly double as it were, Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader," whose presence in the text guides real readers to a certain, often stated, interpretation. The preface declares that the public is clamoring for more of the tale, is entirely convinced of the sincerity of all they have read, and is sure to believe the "facts" of the narrative "sufficient evidence of their own authenticity." Readers who may have begun reading the preface on the understanding that it was fictional, now find their interpretation challenged by the implied readers, the "public," within the text itself and the preface's many claims to veracity

Pym declares in the preface that the early portion of his narrative was written by Mr. Poe, "without altering or distorting a single fact," and the later portions were composed by himself: "This *exposé* being made, it will be seen at once how much of what follows I claim to be my own writing; and it will also be understood that no fact is misrepresented in the first few pages that were written by Mr. Poe. Even to those readers who have not seen the *Messenger*, it will be unnecessary to point out where his portion ends and my own commences; the difference in point of style will be readily perceived" (Poe 433). At the same time Pym reassures readers of the accuracy of his tale, he is careful to attribute authorship of each portion to the appropriate person. Pym is so concerned with accuracy that he wants no misunderstanding of who wrote which sections. Yet, this is the great joke of the preface. There is no "readily perceived" difference in style between one part of the narrative and another. Apart from the segments that are recorded as journal entries, there is no observable difference at all. Pym proves to be Poe, while Poe proves to be Pym.

Twentieth-century critics have made much of the indeterminacies of the text, have searched into the narrative's metatextual resonances; *Pym's* enigmatic qualities have become almost cliché among literary scholars. It is as if *Pym* sparks a kind of perverse fascination among critics to find a meaning in a text that seems to deny the very possibility of making meaning. In an article reviewing thirty years of Poe criticism, Douglas Robinson calls *Pym* an "interpreter's dream-text . . . a textual vacuum begging to be filled with a reading" (47).[104] G. R. Thompson suggests that *Pym* "exemplifies Poe's method of resonant indeterminateness," that it "generates a haunting ambiguity," while J. Gerald Kennedy describes it as "an abyss of

[104] Douglas Robinson, "Reading Poe's Novel: A Speculative Review of Pym Criticism, 1950-1980." *Poe Studies* 14 (1981): 47-54.

interpretation" (Thompson 174; Kennedy).[105] But, like the face of the mysterious man in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), on many levels, *Pym* "does not permit itself to be read," that is, with any degree of consensus as to its "meaning," or even its "function" (Poe 232).[106] Perhaps this indeterminacy is the point of *Pym*, after all. An outspoken critic of the Transcendentalists[107] and the "didactic" in literature, surely Poe would enjoy this critical inability to pin *Pym* down.

Yet, the difficulties in reading and interpreting *Pym* seem to stem, not so much from an impenetrability of the text, as from too much availability. That is, with *Pym*, there are almost too many potential texts to read. In the preface alone there are several possible readings—recognizing the narrative as fiction, but not Pym, believing both Pym and the narrative genuine, or reading both Pym and the narrative as fictions. Once readers have settled on all or some portion of the narrative as fictive, it becomes another challenge to decide to what genre the text belongs. Readers are faced with such a multiplicity of possible interpretations, at the very start of the narrative, that knowing which one to base subsequent interpretations on is quite a dilemma. As it is nearly impossible for readers to walk down every interpretive path available, readers must make choices about which avenues to follow and which to abandon. *Pym* becomes a kind of performative document of the necessity of such interpretive "choices" and of reading as a process of foreclosing, rather than pursuing, possible interpretations.

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[105] G. R. Thompson, "Edgar Allan Poe and the Writers of the Old South," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia UP, 1988); J. Gerald Kennedy, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and the Abyss of Interpretation* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

[106] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) 232-238.

[107] For Poe's relation to Transcendentalism, see Maurice S. Lee, "Absolute Poe: His System of Transcendental Racism" *American Literature* 75.4 (Dec. 2003): 751-81; Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities,1776–1862* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 128–38; Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), 367–75.

In *Pym*, the problems of interpretation and reading are exacerbated by the alternate interpretations the text makes accessible on the surface of the narrative. As bewildered as his readers, Pym, too, is a victim of not knowing which of the many available texts to interpret. In many places throughout the narrative, for instance, when Pym is confined to the dark hull of the *Grampus* or when he and Peters are suddenly buried in a landslide by the Tsalal, Pym suggests, and then discards in turn, varying possible interpretations of the information he has to hand. When Pym wakes disoriented from a sleep prolonged by strong whale-oil fumes, he tests out conflicting explanations for his friend, Augustus', long absence: "Some accident might have happened to [Augustus]—but I could think of none which would account for his suffering me to remain so long a prisoner, except, indeed his having suddenly died or fallen overboard . . . It was possible that we had been baffled by head-winds, and were still in the near vicinity of Nantucket. This notion, however, I was forced to abandon" (Poe 446). In this short excerpt, Pym goes through four different, possible reasons for Augustus's delay. He tries one out, but must discard the first as he moves to another potential interpretation. Unable to keep all four explanations in play at the same time, Pym determines to await Augustus's return for another 24 hours on the understanding that he will make an attempt to free himself if Augustus does not arrive.

Pym's confusion and inability to adequately "read" the fact of Augustus's absence, is symbolically emphasized by the complete darkness of the hull. Pym, literally, cannot read the paper before his eyes. When he comes across a note from Augustus, sent by way of his dog, Tiger, Pym frantically searches for some matches and candles in order to produce enough light by which to read the letter. The matches spent and the candles eaten by the dog, Pym eventually comes upon a plan that would allow him to read the letter, but after he

> . . . placed the slip of paper on the back of a book, and, collecting the

> fragments of the phosphorous matches which I had brought from the barrel, I laid them together on the paper. I then with the palm of my hand, rubbed the whole over quickly, yet steadily. A clear light diffused itself immediately throughout the whole surface; and had there been any writing upon it, I should not have experienced the least difficulty . . . in reading it. Not a syllable was there, however—nothing but a dreary and unsatisfactory blank. (Poe 451-52)

It is not only a meager light source that interferes with this act of reading, but an absent text. Unlike Augustus's absence which spurred several readings, this textual absence confounds all reading. Pym recounts: "the illumination died away in a few seconds, and my heart died away within me as it went" (Poe 452).

Faced with a blank text, Pym cannot read. But the blankness here is not only the absence of written words,[108] but also the central image of Pym's (and *Pym*'s readers') dilemma. Pym cannot read the blank paper because there are no words written on it; the text is not readily apparent. At the same time, however, the blank text in Pym's hand offers readers greater opportunity to read. Without the limits imposed by specific textual features, readers have boundless range in their interpretations. By offering Pym a blank text, Poe illuminates the unsettled reader and the possibility of excess. In its blankness, Pym's letter offers, not a text empty of meaning, but one that can be opened up to signify something unbounded. Yet, this excess, this openness threatens the regulating function of discourse and its powers of repetition and citation.

Responding to this perceived threat, *Pym* problematizes the broadness of the field of interpretation and suggests, instead, a kind of self-limitation as the ideal of successful reading. Indeed, *Pym* takes the self-limitation of reading to such an extent, that reading actually becomes

[108] This blank sheet of paper sparks controversy among Poe scholars. Elsewhere in the narrative (463), Pym explains that Augustus writes to him on the back of an old letter, a duplicate of the forged letter from Pym's uncle. Thus, we would expect to find writing on *both* sides of the paper. Critics argue over whether this discrepancy is simply an error of Poe's or whether it suggests a larger problematic of the narrative as a whole. For a discussion of

displaced by the act of writing. Through the course of the narrative, Pym, who initially serves as both author of the text and as readerly double, begins to minimize the range of his interpretation until he denies entirely the need for interpretation. In the closing pages of *Pym*, Pym can no longer even recognize the existence of the text. He steadfastly avoids interpreting the chasms, despite Peters' view that the etchings in the rock are actually writing and maintains that the chasms and the writing found inside them are the work of Nature, and, therefore, require no interpretation. This insistence on the inscrutability of Nature, that Nature is not itself also a text, is important because it allows Pym to imagine a kind of writing, a kind of authoring that partakes of this inscrutability, that becomes itself, "natural," fixed, unalterable. In this way, Pym suggests a tracing of language back to its source, back to a time before the split between sign and signified. The blank text of the letter serves as an image of the ideal, unreadable text, a space of pure signification, but also, conversely, as an image of, for Poe, problematically broad interpretations. The blank text, then, poses both the problem and offers the solution for Pym. In the course of the narrative, Pym seeks to reduce the number of possible readings in order to ultimately replace reading with a kind of writing that does not necessitate interpretation, or, indeed, require a reader. The first step on this journey, for Pym, is to limit the number of possible interpretations his readings produce. Reading becomes a means of limitation, reduction, repression.[109]

Pym's inability to read the text of the letter proves temporary, as he later considers that he only tried to read one side of the letter. Repeating the same process with the flip side yields a

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the letter as palimpsest—"*the* palimpsest of language itself," see John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 102.

[109] See John Irwin's *American Hierglyphics* for a thought-provoking discussion of knowledge and narration in Poe's work, particularly around the concepts of certainty and self-evidence as problems of the credible narrative. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) 64-113.

readable text, but Pym only catches the last seven words: "'*blood—your life depends upon lying close'* " (Poe 453; italics in original). In his excitement and anxiety, Pym was unable to read all three sentences of the message written in "red ink" by Augustus. This time, scores of interpretations offer themselves up to Pym. He is overwhelmed by the many interpretations drawn from the fragmentary message:

> Had I been able to ascertain the entire contents of the note—the full meaning of the admonition which my friend had thus attempted to convey, that admonition, even although it should have revealed a story of disaster the most unspeakable, could not, I am firmly convinced, have imbued my mind with one tithe of the harrowing and yet indefinable horror with which I was inspired by the fragmentary warning thus received. And "blood," too, that word of all words—so rife at all times with mystery, and suffering, and terror—how trebly full of import did it now appear—how chilly and heavily (disjointed, as it thus was, from any foregoing words to qualify or render it distinct) did its vague syllables fall, amid the deep gloom of my prison, into the innermost recesses of my soul! (Poe 453)

Confronted with a partial text, Pym's readings multiply, particularly around the word "blood," which, in his depression, seems "trebly full of import."

The converse of the situation with the blank page, now, Pym is faced with many alternate, equally frightening, interpretations: "Augustus had, undoubtedly, good reasons for wishing me to remain concealed, and I formed a thousand surmises as to what they could be" (Poe 453). But in this state of a "thousand surmises" Pym is virtually incapacitated. His options are limited by what he fearfully imagines could account for Augustus's message and by this selfsame uncertainty as to what those explanatory events could be: "In a paroxysm of despair I threw myself again upon the mattress, where, for about the period of a day and night, I lay in a kind of stupor" (Poe 454). With so many possible interpretations, Pym is unable to successfully draw coherence from the letter. Again, successful reading seems to rely on the reduction of interpretive options, on foreclosing alternate meanings.

Writing "Nature"/Reading Race

If, as the narrative seems to suggest, the skilled reader reads successfully through the elimination of possible interpretations, then by the middle of the narrative Pym is becoming a skilled reader. Once on board the *Jane Guy* and recovered from his thirst and starvation, Pym enters wholeheartedly into Captain Guy's plan to locate and record the longitude and latitude of various groups of islands and to explore areas near the South Pole. Pym declares, "it was with feelings of most intense interest that I heard Captain Guy express his resolution of pushing boldly to the southward" (Poe 523). Indeed, Pym's enthusiasm for the project is reflected in the narrative, which, at this point, becomes a detailed account of each of the islands, including the longitude and latitude where each island is located, descriptions of the landscape, vegetation, and animal life they encounter, along with a thorough history of each island's discovery and subsequent visits by Western sea captains.[110] The precision Pym attempts in this portion of the narrative exemplifies his newfound desire for scientific accuracy, and his pride in "opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention" (Poe 526). This longing for accuracy or that which does not require interpretation is frustrated, however, by Pym's own ill preparation, and by what the text, on another level, suggests is the essential impossibility of entirely reliable, stable interpretations. As he progressively wields more and more narrative control over his tale, the narrative itself begins to unravel this imposed stability. Pym later admits in a footnote that "I cannot, in the first portion

[110] Dana Nelson observantly points out the commercial and colonial implications of Pym's interest in the islands and also his awareness of the history of Western exploration in the region. See Nelson, *The Word in Black and White* 90-108.

of what is here written, pretend to strict accuracy in respect to dates, or latitudes and longitudes, having kept no regular journal until after the period of which the first portion treats. In many instances I have relied altogether upon memory" (Poe footnote 526). The details presented so assiduously have been faked. They are not "scientific" records of data, but recreations, memories.[111]

But Pym's interest in science and his desire to give his journal the appearance of a scientific paper mask a deeper need for the unambiguous, the self-evident, the "natural," which takes the form of a *refusal* to read. When Captain Guy "fancies" that he sees a carving of a turtle on the prow of a broken canoe found on Bennet's Isle in the South Seas, Pym fails to recognize the design as the work of humans: "Captain Guy fancied that he made out the figure of a tortoise, but the resemblance did not strike me forcibly" (Poe 526). By characterizing the Captain's surmise as a mere "fancy," Pym is able to dismiss possible evidence of human inhabitation of the island, but most importantly for himself, he is able to banish the uncertainty contained in the image and the necessity of making sense of, that is, of reading the cryptic figure. Pym's resistance to reading becomes more marked on the island of Tsalal, an island which Pym knows is inhabited. From the first encounter with the natives of the island, Pym sets about producing a series of misreadings that hold dire consequences. Pym's readings often involve comparison between that which is familiar to him and a new situation. This strategy of comparison is a widespread antebellum method of interpretation.

As Ronald and Mary Saracino Zboray point out, nineteenth-century readers often compared the books and articles they were reading with scenarios from their own lives, as their

[111] For a discussion of connections between the themes of remembrance and death in Poe's fiction with losses in his personal life, see James M. Hutchisson, *Poe* (UP of Mississippi, 2005).

correspondence attests.[112] But what is most interesting about the comparisons nineteenth-century readers made is that they used these parallels or disjunctures between the texts they read and the lives they led in order to judge the veracity of the text. In other words, the "truth" of a text was often measured against the reader's estimation of the likelihood of plot details or how "real" the characters felt. Veracity, a trait highly prized by nineteenth-century readers, is the ultimate indicator of a text's "truth" or moral edification, and hence, its usefulness to the antebellum reader. This technique of comparison ultimately produces a sense of authority in the reader. By comparing a text with past experience, the reader is empowered to determine the authenticity of the plot and characters within the text. Comparison, as an interpretive technique, puts the reader into a position of authority, with his or her previous experience as the expert knowledge on which judgment is based: "On a deeper level, these texts granted the reader authority. In discussing the text, readers could pass judgment not only upon the author's ability to render an experience believable but upon the writer's integrity as well. By making themselves the arbiters of truth and falsehood, these readers empowered themselves" (Zboray and Zboray 153).

By comparing a new text with familiar texts, Pym produces a reading of the new text, but one colored sharply by preconceptions based on his past experience and biases and, most critically, a reading which, for Pym, is imbued with a sense of authority. Pym's interpretive acts on the island of Tsalal may well prove to be poor or inaccurate, but for Pym they *feel* authoritative, based as they are on his previous experience. Yet, Poe takes care to emphasize that the island is not only unfamiliar, but dis-familiar, completely foreign:

> At every step we took inland the conviction forced itself upon us that we were in a country differing essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men. We saw nothing with which we had been formerly conversant. The trees resembled no

[112] Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "'Have You Read . . . ?': Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52.2 (1997) : 139-70.

> growth of either the torrid, the temperate, or the northern frigid zones, and were altogether unlike those of the lower southern latitudes we had already traversed. The very rocks were novel in their mass, their colour, and their stratification; and the streams themselves, utterly incredible as it may appear, had so little in common with those of other climates, that we were scrupulous of tasting them, and, indeed, had difficulty in bringing ourselves to believe that their qualities were purely those of nature. . . . The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in the vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled. (530-31)

Pym's ability to read accurately diminishes as the gap between his expectations and reality widens.

In contrast, the islanders' perceptions seem to sharpen when faced with the dis-familiar. When Too-wit and his people come aboard the *Jane Guy*, their "astonishment . . . appeared to be far too deep for words, for they roamed about in silence, broken only by low ejaculations" (Poe 529). Pym's astonishment, on the other hand, always finds expression in words. Even when Pym is at a loss to explain an event, he produces quantities of verbiage to convey his confusion, as he does in describing the demise of the sailors aboard the ghost-ship: "It is possible, indeed, that poison, accidentally introduced into some of their sea-stores, may have brought about the disaster; or that the eating of some unknown venomous species of fish, or other marine animal, or oceanic bird, might have induced it—but it is utterly useless to form conjectures where all is involved, and will, no doubt, remain for ever involved, in the most appalling and unfathomable mystery" (Poe 492). In near silence, Too-wit and the islanders study the sailors' guns. Pym does not "believe that they had the least suspicion of their actual use" (Poe 529). Instead, the islanders "[take the guns] for idols, seeing the care we had of them, and the attention with which we watched their movements while handling them" (Poe 529). Pym does not realize that the islanders accurately perceive the sailors' reliance upon their weapons for both physical safety and cultural authority. If Too-wit does, indeed, think the guns are idols as

Pym suggests he does, then he rightly perceives the centrality of the weapons to the culture and actions of the Westerners.

Pym reads the unfamiliar, new texts he is confronted with on Tsalal in terms of what is familiar to him. For instance, when he is faced with a "singular-looking land animal" with "perfectly white," "silky hair" and long, "brilliant scarlet" claws and teeth, what Pym sees is an animal that is a combination of rat, cat, and dog: "The tail was peaked like that of a rat, and about a foot and a half long. The head resembled a cat's with the exception of the ears—these were flapped like the ears of a dog" (Poe 527). The strange and new are revisioned as the familiar and prosaic, even domestic, cat, dog, and rat. With greater consequence, Pym produces a (racist) reading of the "jet black" islanders in terms of what were familiar, racist, imperial scripts.

Pym's view of the islanders draws from stereotypes of African-Americans as built for labor, yet simultaneously lazy, ignorant, dim-witted, easily amused, and happy with a lot of servitude. Pym describes the natives as physically more robust than the white sailors, "of a more muscular and brawny frame," but "about the ordinary stature of Europeans" (Poe 528). Like the mixed race Native American/white Peters, who is built "of the most Herculean mould" and capable of "prodigious strength when under excitement," racial "others" are capable of a kind of physical exertion that Pym and the other whites are not (Poe 459). Nonetheless, according to Pym, they fail to make constructive use of their physical prowess. Pym describes the natives' village in the most deplorable of terms and chides their lack of industry: "[t]he dwellings were of the most miserable description imaginable, and unlike those of even the lowest of the savage races with whom mankind are acquainted, were of no uniform plan" (Poe 532). Not only does Pym deride the village of the islanders, but in this statement, he goes so far as to place them

outside the category of "mankind." Here, "mankind" is synonymous with the white, American sailors, with Pym, with, indeed, the white American reading public. By implicitly including the reader among the "mankind" invoked, Pym garners the reader's, at least tacit, support of his judgments.

He goes on to explicate the natives' other characteristics—their supposed ignorance and dim mental abilities. The islanders' speech is described by Pym as "jabbering" (Poe 528). Their manner is childlike and unintelligent: "the chief evinced symptoms of extreme surprise and delight, clapping his hands, slapping his thighs and breast, and laughing obstreperously. His followers behind joined in his merriment, and for some minutes the din was so excessive as to be absolutely deafening" (Poe 528). At this point in the narrative, Pym is well-disposed toward the islanders, though he understands them only in terms of his racist expectations. Here he praises them for showing "no disposition to thievery . . . Throughout the whole of their visit they evinced the most friendly manner" (Poe 529). Pym's view of the islanders partakes of the same racialist thinking displayed in Orson and Lorenzo Fowler's 1846 *Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied*, where the supposedly small size of the brains of African-Americans would inhibit their intellectual abilities: "[the] smaller reasoning organs [of African-Americans] would give them but little depth of intellect, and a feeble judgment, with very little talent for contriving and planning" (qtd. in Horsman 144).[113] Indeed, Pym goes on to tell the reader, "we should have been the most suspicious of human beings had we entertained a single thought of perfidy on the part of a people who treated us so well" (Poe 538). It is impossible for Pym to conceive of treachery on the part of the islanders because "[m]atters went on . . . very amicably for several days" and the islanders were, after all, "fully delighted" in the *Jane Guy*'s presence on the island

[113] Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1981).

(Poe 536; 535). Most importantly, however, is his belief that the islanders were intellectually incapable of deceiving the white sailors. Because Pym (mis)reads the natives' behavior in terms of his expectation that they be simple and childlike in their dealings, he misses the subtle clues to their duplicity.[114] Moreover, because he can only (mis)read the white sailors' abusive behavior in terms of what he sees as an European-American's natural right to exploit native peoples, he cannot find motive for the islanders' deceit.

Unlike earlier points in the narrative, where Pym produces several alternate interpretations to explain an unknown, when Pym confronts a racial "other" he seems not to search for explanations. The explanation is ready at the tip of his pen. He simply draws from the increasingly disseminated scientific racism saturating public discourse in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. As Reginald Horsman makes plain in his careful study of the growth of scientific racism and its role in American expansion, the discourse elaborating a "scientific" basis of racial difference was used to undergird the belief in American manifest destiny. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, "the emphasis was on the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world" (Horsman 2). Given the pervasiveness of the belief in America's manifest destiny, a destiny sanctioned at once by both God and biology, race, understood in the new "scientific" terms as a biological fact of existence, becomes just one more legitimating factor in an imperialist world view.

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[114] Pym's misreading of the islanders proceeds from a quite similar interpretive paradigm to the one employed by Melville's Delano is *Benito Cereno*, where Delano, too, misreads the text of slave insurrection because he thinks blacks "too stupid" to conspire against his own skills of perception. Melville's story offers an ironic distance from Delano's reading habits. While Poe does not endorse Pym's mode of reading, either, the text does not seem to challenge Pym's *conclusions* about the islanders.

Pym's interpretations of the islanders are both racist and colonialist. Captain Guy is looking for an economic advantage in his encounter with the islanders, for something he can "turn to profit" (Poe 535), and Pym comes up with a plan, which he suggests to Captain Guy, that exploits both the island's resources and the labor of the islanders themselves.[115] "A bargain was accordingly struck, perfectly satisfactory to both parties, by which it was arranged that . . . the [*Jane Guy*] should proceed on her route" while the islanders collect and dry the *biche de mer*, an edible sea-cucumber that is sold as a delicacy in the Chinese market (Poe 536). Later, the *Jane Guy* will return to reap the proceeds. Pym never stops to consider whether the "blue beads, knives, red cloth, and so forth" offered in exchange for this work are adequate compensation for the effort involved. According to the racist, colonial conventions by which Pym reads, natives are supposed to be pleased by beads and baubles. Indeed, Pym expresses "surprise" when Too-wit shows "contempt" for the blue beads Captain Guy offers (Poe 534). When Captain Guy makes minute inquiries into the economy and products of the island with a view toward his own profit, Too-wit seems slow to understand. Pym seems to attribute this slowness to the language barrier or, perhaps, to Too-wit's mental dimness, rather than to a leader's reluctance to reveal information which might compromise the safety or resources of his people.

Though Too-wit is supposedly unaware of the use of the strangers' weapons, when they come to the village, he manages, quite masterfully, to place the crew in a position where they cannot use their guns. Pym's language here reveals the extent to which the crew is surprised to find themselves outsmarted: "[we] presently found ourselves in a situation peculiarly uncomfortable, if not indeed critical. We were on the ground, twelve in number, with the savages, as many as forty, sitting on their hams so closely around us that, if any disturbance had

[115] Look to Harry Levin for a discussion of global exploration and national/capitalistic expansion and Poe. See Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

arisen, we should have found it impossible to make use of our arms, or indeed to have risen on our feet" (Poe 534). Moreover, Too-wit's warriors have succeeded in achieving a tactical advantage of their own. As Too-wit leads the crew back to his village, "the party of Too-wit (the whole hundred and ten savages of the canoes) was momentarily strengthened by smaller detachments, of from two to six or seven, which joined us, as if by accident, at different turns in the road. There appeared so much of a system in this that I could not help feeling distrust" (Poe 531-32). Yet all the while, Pym's depiction of the islanders as "savage," "ignorant," "jabbering," "merry," "inquisitive," and disorderly is calculated to create an image of them as childlike and incapable of advanced reasoning.

Pym takes his Western cultural supremacy for granted, never once suspecting that the islanders might mind the exploitation of their home by the crew of the *Jane Guy*. Whereas the white sailors walk about the island "armed to the teeth," the "black skin warriors" bring no weapons (Poe 538). Too-wit explains that "there was no need of arms where all were brothers" (Poe 538). The sailors miss the irony here and simply accept this comment "in good part" (Poe 538). Pym and the others fail to consider their own behavior in light of Too-wit's words or to recognize their own aggression toward the islanders.

After the massacre of the *Jane Guy*'s captain and crew by Tsalal's inhabitants, Pym and Peters explore a series of peculiarly-shaped chasms looking for an escape route off the island. Even at this moment of high tension, Pym's obsession with accuracy takes center stage. The narrative describes the shapes and sizes of these chasms in great detail, which Pym has taken pains to record:

> The pit, from its eastern to its western extremity, was about five hundred yards in length, when all its windings were threaded; the distance from east to west in a straight line not being more (I should suppose, having no means of accurate examination) than forty or fifty yards. Upon first descending into the chasm—

> that is to say, for a hundred feet downward from the summit of the hill, the sides of the abyss bore little resemblance to each other, and, apparently, had at no time been connected, the surface of one being of the soapstone, and the other of marl, granulated with some metallic matter. . . . The precise formation of the chasm will be best understood by means of a delineation taken upon the spot; for I had luckily with me a pocket-book and pencil, which I preserved with great care through a long series of subsequent adventure, and to which I am indebted for memoranda of many subjects which would otherwise have been crowded from my remembrance. (Poe 549-50)

Despite Pym's limited means of "accurate examination," he details the height and width of the various features of the chasms, along with the materials from which they are made, and provides drawings of each chasm, labeled figures 1-5. No longer to be caught unprepared, as he was with the exact locations of the islands, this time Pym has a notebook with him, ready to record each event with precise accuracy, paradoxically believing that his own acts of inscription will forestall subsequent acts of reading or interpretation.

In the third chasm, Peters notices "a range of singular-looking indentures in the surface of the marl," which with "a very slight exertion of the imagination . . . might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with out-stretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they really were such" (Poe 551). But Pym dissuades Peters from this view, finding a "scientific" explanation for the markings: "I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of the marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentures; thus proving them to have been the work of nature" (Poe 551). Pym is able to convince Peters that the cut-outs are the accidental shavings of the "avalanche," but his attempt to dissuade Peters seems to begin even before he

notices the rock chips. Pym and Peters enter the chasms "scarcely [able to] bring [them]selves to believe it altogether the work of nature" (Poe 549), but by the time Peters discovers the markings, Pym is assured that they are not human writing. Through his detailed recording of the contours and sizes of the chasms, Pym has exorcised the temptation to interpret the shapes as texts and insists instead upon treating them as objects of scientific observation. Hence, though he claims the indentures the "work of nature," Pym reproduces the markings exactly in his notebook, ironically creating a text from that which he insists is not made by humans.

His inflexible resistance to reading the markings becomes clear when Pym reveals that he was "finally" able to convince Peters by finding the rock chips, suggesting that he had already tried a set of previous, unconvincing arguments. Pym's increasing imposition of narrative control upon unsettling experiences becomes clear in the above passage. Pym sets up his own, possible, but not certain, explanation for the indentures and then proceeds to create a rhetorical sense of a logical chain of events.[116] First, Pym finds the rock chips, which could have resulted from an avalanche or earthquake as Pym suggests, or been the work of a human with a chisel, which Pym refuses to consider. Then finding that the chips fit into the indentures, claims that they had "evidently" fallen from the surface, despite the fact that no evidence of this has yet been produced. Next, Pym proceeds to claim that the rock chips "prove" his explanation, though they only do this on a rhetorical level. In fact, Pym has no more evidence to support one view of the

[116] Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), which details the composition process of his poem "The Raven," offers an interesting parallel to this scene in *Pym*. "The Philosophy of Composition" outlines the writing process as one in which the writer wields extraordinary control over the text and, indeed, the reader, through the carefully calculated effect the text produces. Pym seeks a similar kind of control here. Speaking of "The Philosophy of Composition," Louis Rubin, Jr. fleshes out a possible reading of Poe's extreme desire for control of the text: "little knowledge of psychology is needed to grasp the obvious fact that the fixation upon authorial control, upon the necessity for employing calculation rather than emotion when composing a poem or story, the constant insistence that the writer must be absolute master of his material and shape everything in the work toward a predetermined end, are the expression of a dire personal need on his own part, and represent his effort to enforce such discipline upon his own very intense emotional life" (129). See Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989).

circumstance than the other. But his insistence on removing the possibility of doubt from the surface of his narrative suggests a major shift in Pym's attitude toward reading. From his early willingness, while aboard the *Grampus*, to embrace alternate explanations of events, to the this late intolerance of uncertainty, Pym's concept of reading has solidified into the notion of reading as the reduction of possible meaning, ultimately, of reading as non-interpretation, as in the non-interpretation of what Pym sees as "scientific" accuracies.

In the preface of the narrative, Pym declares himself certain that "the facts of [his] narrative would prove . . . sufficient evidence of their own authenticity," a claim Pym eagerly maintains by asserting that Nature speaks for itself (433). By the end of Pym's narrative, a narrative in which, mind you, multiple explanations have been considered for every event, Pym declares Nature "sufficient evidence of its own authenticity." When Pym's interpretations are most shaken by the unexpected massacre of his shipmates, Pym's view of Nature becomes absolute. "Natural" objects and circumstances do not require investigation; they are self-evident, according to Pym. Like the "apparent," "mere natural wells" that Pym and Peters do not "think it worth while" to investigate during their search of the chasms, Nature does not need interpretation (Poe 552). As a text, it does not rely upon a reader's "reading," recognition, or interpretation.

Dana Nelson makes a related point when she explains that Pym creates a "sophisticated binary" which privileges "self-evident Nature over manufactured art. In doing so he is able to displace responsibility for interpretation—the self-verifying apparatus of the mind—onto the eternally inscribed text of the world" (104). But what it is most critical to recognize about Pym's newfound insistence on the self-evidence of that which he claims as "natural," is the fact that Pym, as author of the narrative, reserves the power to *authorize* the "natural." That is, Pym is the

one to declare whether a thing is "natural" or artificial and he does this by means of writing it as such. In effect, Pym's act of writing literally author-izes the inscriptions in the chasm to be the work of nature, but also authorizes, gives authority to, the statement that the inscriptions are simple, natural fissures in the rock, de-authorizing Peters' belief that the figures in the rock are writing. Pym draws on the language of science, to underwrite this authority. He trusts that "progressing science" will "verify some of the most important and most improbable of [his] statements" in the narrative (Poe 460). When Pym concludes his discussion of the "indentures" with a representative drawing and the statement: "Figure 4. presents an accurate copy of the whole," he does so, fully confident that the subject has been adequately developed and recorded by true scientific method (Poe 551).

For Pym, the text of Nature requires no explanation and his representation merely repeats that which is already self-evident. In this way, reading is erased, to be replaced by writing. Pym's act of writing, his reproduction of the figures, forestalls an act of *reading* on the reader's part. By devoting narrative space to the argument with Peters over the possibility that the marks in the rock are writing, Pym creates an implied reader in Peters. Oddly enough, he seems to ask Peters to become an implied "non-reader." That is, he tries to control Peters' view of the markings so that he, too, will deny that they hold any significance. Peters will then serve as a model within the text for the actual readers of *Pym*. By dismissing Peters' views as the "adopt[ion]" . . . [of] idle opinion," the maintenance of a carelessly-formed surmise, Pym is able to "convince him of his error," thus suggesting the that the real reader ought to abandon this surmise, as well (Poe 551). Pym's text, his act of writing, assumes ascendance over the text(s) of the unknown native(s) writing in the rock, as well as over any alternate interpretations of the inscriptions that Peters may care to produce. Writing replaces reading.

Pym's insistence that the inscriptions are natural and his complete inflexibility on this point, demonstrate the ultimate conclusion to, and the final, ironic phase of Pym's ever-narrowing concept of reading. Pym acts out an increasing need for narrative control by seizing the interpretive authority of his own text by replacing reading, per se, with his own act of writing. The narrative's closing chapters "irrecoverably lost through the accident by which [Pym] perished" become the fruition of Pym's attempt to replace reading with writing (Poe 561). Pym's chapters have been written but will never be read by the public and become, consequently, a text without a reader. Pym's authorial control over the final chapters of his narrative is complete. Yet, with the inclusion of the "Note," by a fictional editor, Poe disturbs Pym's desperately sought control. The editor challenges Pym's assertion that the markings in the rock are insignificant and provides translations of the inscriptions (562-63), all of which heighten the sense of expectancy surrounding the mysterious writing and the oddly color-coded island of Tsalal.

Performing Race

In *The Word in Black and White*, Dana Nelson puts forward a superb reading of the colonialist enterprise in the narrative and offers a correction to literary critics who focus almost exclusively on textual concerns in *Pym*: "[the novel] clearly emphasizes . . . the problematic, even violent basis of colonial knowledge (science/theory), subjectivity, and authority. It is not solely about absence of meaning, but about the impulses—social, political, economic—that undergird the construction of any system of meaning. *Pym* offers a serious examination of the questionable motives behind the interpretive will and the real, material ramifications of those

interpretations" (Nelson 108). Nelson rightly emphasizes the violence inherent in colonial "exploration" and the exploitative, material consequences of the capitalist/racist/expansionist enthusiasm in which *Pym* clearly participates. But what is most significant about her analysis is her recognition of the two levels on which the text works. On one level, "*Pym* is a racist text, on another the text provides a reading that counters racist colonial ideology and the racialist, scientific knowledge structure" (Nelson 92). *Pym* exposes the workings of the colonial expansionist project and the degree to which this project is inherent in the knowledge structures and language systems on which the novel, and antebellum American life, in general, are based. In doing so, Nelson proposes that *Pym* offers the possibility to imagine different ways of structuring knowledge and different kinds of power exchanges that do not rely primarily on human exploitation. As Nelson's work suggests, it is precisely, and surprisingly, in *Pym*'s treatment of *race* that the novel reveals itself to be more than a racist text. Yet, I would add to Nelson's conclusions, that it is, rather, precisely in examining the convergence of *Pym*'s treatment of *reading* and race that we are best able to develop all of the possible implications of Poe's doubled text.

Without considering the depiction of Pym himself as both reader and writer within the narrative, we miss the performative quality of Pym's interpretive acts, the extent to which *Pym* performs the reading of a naturalized blackness and a naturalized whiteness and, in the process, exposes the system of meaning-making that produces and then oppresses the Other. By considering Pym specifically as a reader, his attempts to seize control of the narrative are made plain. First, Pym reduces the number of alternate readings he can produce, and in so doing, redefines reading itself as the foreclosure of interpretation. Ultimately, he seeks to replace reading with writing, as a way of negating the role of the reader entirely and side-stepping the

interpretive process. For Pym, reading ends in the face of self-evident Nature. Yet, Pym himself produces this version of Nature within the text. It is Pym's performance of failed/stunted reading that allows us to unravel some of the ramifications of Pym's production of Nature, the most critical of which is the naturalization of race.

By carefully unraveling the multiple threads Poe weaves in *Pym,* we begin to take in a novel that is in one reading a racist text performing an almost hysterical rendering of the "threat" of blackness, blackness as "barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty" (Poe 538). In an alternate, equally important reading, *Pym* performs the act of reading as the production of cultural texts, revealing reading in an active, productive light, rather than as the derivative work of "interpretation." What this second reading of *Pym* holds is the possibility to come to grips with an understanding of reading that is at once dynamic and productive, that is, certainly, formed in relation to culture, but is also, active in the production of cultural texts.

Considering *Pym* in light of its performative qualities is most illustrative when it comes to the subject of race. *Pym* performs the sum of white inventions regarding race. Race plainly saturates the text, reverberates through it in, perhaps, un*readable* ways. That is, perhaps, race works in *Pym* by not fully intellectualized, not strictly decodable means. *Pym* cannot be said to be simply *about* race, so much as the text *acts out* race. It is in the coupling of this performance of race with the performance of reading that my interest is excited. For, *Pym* plays out the psychic content of race, from the colonizer's perspective. Poe's novel performs at least three major tropes of the persistence of race as a social fact: race as unbridled fearsomeness, race as "biological fact," and race as observable sign of difference. Each of these tropes serves to naturalize the concept of race as difference and this notion of race is itself naturalized through Pym's refusal to read the chasm writing on the island of Tsalal. Pym's insistence on the self-

evidence of Nature and his endorsement of his own "scientific" investigation into the inscriptions, underwrite his refusal to even consider that the markings are the work of people, rather than accidents of Nature. Yet, Pym's text actually produces the vision of Nature it espouses, while concealing its own productive properties. In this way, race itself can become naturalized. Where Nature requires no explanation and race is a "natural" and observable difference between people, there race itself requires no explanation, no interpretation. Race is understood as merely "natural," as "scientific" fact.

Race as Fear

The trope of race as fear is acted out in the mutiny scene where a group of sailors violently seize control of the *Grampus*, killing most of the crew: "A scene of the most horrible butchery ensued. The bound seamen were dragged to the gangway. Here the cook stood with an axe, striking each victim on the head as he was forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers" (Poe 458). The fear generated here takes the form of fear of violence from a black, threatening Other.[117] The cook, for instance, is twice described as a racial Other. First, he is called "a negro" and later, the "black cook . . . a perfect demon" (Poe 458-59). The black cook is the most violent of all the mutineers and the only one to use an ax in the mass-murder of twenty-two of the *Grampus*' crew. Clearly, the cook embodies an image of blackness as violent and threatening. But it is important to recognize that Poe does not produce this image in a vacuum,

[117] Despite the fact that most of the sailors engaged in Poe's mutiny are technically white, the scene, nonetheless, calls up fears of black insurrection. The fact that the cook, who is described as black several times, is first, involved in an overthrow of traditional order, and second, armed with an ax, strongly suggests a correlation between the mutiny scene and the Nat Turner rebellion, as well as other slave uprisings. For discussions of fear and slave revolt in *Pym*, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 31–59; Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb*, 42–62; and Nelson, *The Word in Black and White* 90–108.

but rather in the context of antebellum sociopolitical life. The cook's weapon of choice, the ax, rings with historical and psychic significance since the ax or hatchet was the primary weapon used by Nat Turner, a Virginia slave who led an uprising and killing spree in August of 1831.

Nat Turner, a 31-year-old slave and preacher led a small group of other slaves to insurrection and the brutal murder of over 50 white men, women, and children, starting with his master and family. As the group moved through the Southampton, Virginia neighborhood, killing every white they found, they were strengthened by the addition of other slaves, swelling to about 40 rebels. For a day and a half the uprising continued. Both state and federal troops were called to put down the rebellion. Most of the rebels were caught immediately, but Nat Turner remained at large for over two months. In the days and weeks that followed the uprising, at least 100 innocent African-Americans were killed. Turner himself was ultimately captured and later executed on November 11, 1831.

The Nat Turner rebellion remained deeply disturbing to both Southern and Northern whites. Within days of the uprising, newspapers like the Richmond *Enquirer* were publishing accounts of the murders and fueling fear about the threat posed by black men. Even the earliest descriptions of Turner's men are rife with predatory, animal imagery. Described as "blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps," "the horrible ferocity of these monsters" is dwelt upon in the newspaper article with appalled fascination (reproduced in Tragle 43).[118] The images created here are frightening in their suggestion of violence, but also strangely comforting to whites. By imaging Turner and his associates as animals, the *Enquirer* can minimize concerns about the human capacity for this kind of large-scale violence and the human cost of slavery, while maintaining the larger fiction about blacks as chattel.

[118] "The Banditti," *The Richmond Enquirer,* Richmond, Va. 30 Aug. 1831, reproduced in Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: U of Mass. P, 1971) 43-44.

But what is most interesting about these descriptions is the degree to which they belie their own narrative. The *Enquirer* attempts to allay white fears, while simultaneously garnering continued readership with provoking statements, like: "The danger is thought to be over—but prudence still demands precaution. The lower country should be on the alert" (in Tragle 43-44). Yet, the article goes on, "The case of Nat Turner warns us. No black man ought to be permitted to turn a Preacher through the country. The law must be enforced or the tragedy of Southampton appeals to us in vain" (in Tragle 44). As the article mentions, one specific threat that Turner poses is his literacy. He is not, simply, a wolf, an animal who can be overmastered. Instead, Turner is a literate man, despite being a slave, is by all accounts quite intelligent, and a preacher who has the ear and respect of many slaves. As the *Enquirer*'s depiction of Turner as a brute falls apart, a more disturbing image of Turner threatens the very rule of law.

In November 1831, when the Law has captured, tried, convicted, and executed Turner, a Southern lawyer named Thomas Gray produces a document which purports to be the unaltered confession and last words of Nat Turner. Forty thousand copies of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) were published within two weeks of Turner's execution, flooding the marketplace with an unsettling explanation for the murders. Unrepentant and unshaken in his belief that God called him to "slay [his] enemies with their own weapons," Turner declares himself ready to "suffer the fate that awaits [him]," but does not express regret or sorrow for what he has done (Gray reproduced in Aptheker 138; 146).[119] His words, mediated through Gray, haunt antebellum white readers.

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[119] Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. : As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray in the Prison Where He Was Confined, and Acknowledged by Him To Be Such When Read before the Court of Southampton; with the Certificate, Under the Seal of the Court, Convened at Jerusalem, November 5, 1831 for His Trial* (Baltimore, 1831), reproduced in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: The Environment, the Event, the Effects* (New York: Humanities P, 1966) 127-151. Subsequent page references to Gray are to this reprinting.

Potent as the violence of *The Confessions* is in its painstaking and matter-of-fact rendition of each murder, what seems to last beyond the murders is not only a sense of their brutality, but also a kind of frenzied hysteria about the threat blackness poses to white Southerners. The fear is palpable in the letter one Southern woman, a Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, writes to Harrison Gray Otis: "Our whites unhappily evince *too much fear* of those wretches . . . it is like a smothered volcano—we know not when, or where, the flame will burst forth, but we know that death in the most horrid form threatens us. Some have died, others have become deranged from apprehension since the South Hampton affair" (259-60; italics in original).[120] Or, consider the words written by another Virginian to a friend in Cincinnati: "These insurrections have alarmed my wife so as really to endanger her health, and I have not slept without anxiety in three months. Our nights are sometimes spent in listening to noises. A corn song, a hog call, has often been a subject of nervous terror, and a cat, in the dining room, will banish sleep for the night. There has been and still is a *panic* in all this country (qtd. in Aptheker 64; italics in original). This letter is written in December 1831 or January 1832, a full three to four months after the event.

All told, the total number of African-Americans dying in response to the Turner rebellion far exceeded the number of white deaths sustained in the insurrection (Aaptheker 59-62), and Virginia's security response, with at least 3000 troops was more than adequate to the threat (Tragle 16-21). White retribution took the form of vigilante lynchings, assaults, raids on the homes and persons of free blacks, and harassment for weeks following the uprising. The "slaughter of many blacks without trial and under circumstances of great barbarity" was reported in the September 17, 1831 New York *Atlas* (qtd. in Aptheker 61). The *Lynchburg Virginian*

[120] S. E. Morison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis, Federalist 1765-1848*, vol. 2 (Boston and New York, 1913) 259-60.

published an order issued by Brigadier General Eppes on August 28, 1831. Eppes' order barely mentions "all the instances that he is bound to believe have occurred, but pass in silence what has happened, with the deepest sorrow that any necessity should be supposed to have existed, to justify any single act of atrocity.—But he feels himself bound to declare and hereby announces, to the troops and the citizens, that no excuse will be allowed to any other acts of violence" (in Tragle 74).[121] Urging restraint to "preserve the right of property," that is, to prevent more injuries or killings of slaves, the so-called property of white masters, Eppes seeks to contain the spread of violent vigilanteeism following the revolt (in Tragle 75). Moreover, conspiracy theories abounded, including the theory that an even larger-scale insurrection was originally planned which included slaves in multiple states, but that Nat Turner's group had mistaken the date and started the uprising early. Misinformation, rumor, and fear added to the already disturbing events to produce an atmosphere of barely contained suspicion, hostility, and white on black vengeful violence.

Perhaps the furor following Turner's uprising can best be understood in our day through the term *terror,* as Eric Sundquist argues in *To Wake the Nations*. White slaveholders cast about in vain for cohesive explanations, magnifying their own fear and failure to understand: "The white paranoia that followed the revolt bred distortions that in turn heightened apprehension—accounts suggesting that the rebels wore outfits ceremoniously dyed red in their victims' blood, or more strikingly, that they drank the blood of the slaveholders" (Sundquist 69).[122] While such rumors ultimately proved unfounded, the sense of unbounded terror is palpable in these reports. Within the text of *The Confessions*, this sort of terror is expressed in the careful, but passionless

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[121] "*The Lynchburg Virginian*, Lynchburg, Va., 8 September 1831," reproduced in Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: U of Mass. P, 1971) 73-75.

rendition of each murder, particularly in the naming of each individual. The high point of Turner's detached rehearsal comes when he "view[s] the mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, and immediately start[s] in quest of other victims" (Gray 142). Sundquist deftly reads Turner's silent survey of the scene as a kind of witnessing that foregrounds black subjectivity. By demonstrating the "ability of slaves to simply kill their masters with indiscriminate abandon" as a "truth of slavery that demanded recognition," Turner is able to enact a revenge upon the white, slaveholding body that "further accentuated his usurpation of the master's own power and augmented his display of subjectivity" (Sundquist 70, 71). On some level, the threat posed to the Southern slaveholding society is not simply the potential of a single slave uprising, but more importantly, the threat posed by black subjectivity, by the slave's assertion of subjectivity against the dehumanizing facts of slavery.

When Gray questions Turner about a larger conspiracy of revolt through Virginia and into North Carolina, he claims ignorance, but asks in turn: " '[C]an you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in the heavens might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking'[?]" (Gray 146). Turner suggests that others may be plotting uprisings independent of his own. Take note, however, of his mention of the events in the heavens. Perhaps, the statement simply reflects Turner's firm belief that the insurrection was divinely ordered, but, it is also a powerful testament to the role of reading in the assumption of subjectivity. As Turner reveals in *The Confessions*, his reading of "signs" was a critical catalyst toward insurrection. Cognizantly, or not, Turner points to reading of the heavens, of "signs," of Nature, as an important precursor to the subjectivity that precedes revolt and other acts of agency.

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[122] Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 69.

This peculiar quality of reading, that spurs the assumption of subjectivity in *The Confessions,* requires a more thorough consideration, particularly insofar as it illuminates the performances of reading and race in *Pym.* I am not the first to consider Nat Turner's rebellion in relation to Poe's novel, nor will I attempt to draw a one-to-one comparison between events described in *The Confessions* and the plot of *Pym*. Rather, I want to pick up on John Carlos Rowe's suggestion in *At Emerson's Tomb,* that "Poe's own repressed fears regarding slave rebellions in the South and the deeper fear that southern aristocratic life itself might be passing are the psychic *contents* that provoke the poetic narrative" (53; italics in original).[123] For this reason, it's worth looking more closely at the two texts to examine the specific points of reference between them, not to argue that *Pym* derives explicitly from *The Confessions,* but to suggest that *Pym* acts out much of the anxiety that Turner's rising calls up.[124]

Surely one of the most frightening aspects of Turner's rebellion for white slaveholders was the fact that it seemed to come out of the blue. Gray plays up the unexpected nature of Turner's revolt: "Whilst not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind, schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites—schemes too fearfully executed as far as his fiendish band proceeded in their desolating march" (Gray 130). Pym includes a similar scene of stunned failure to perceive the true plans of the islanders: "A very short while sufficed to prove that this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply-laid plan for our destruction, and that the islanders for whom we entertained such

[123] John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 53.

[124] Many critics make casual reference to the fearsomeness inspired by Nat Turner and its connection to Poe's work. See especially, Sam Worley, "*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and the Ideology of Slavery." *ESQ* 40 (1994) 219-50; Louis Rubin, Jr. *The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989.

inordinate feelings of esteem were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe" (Poe 538).

In each instance, white misreadings of the black Other stem from a fundamental misrecognition. The whites read a text of black docility and servility. Turner declares that his master, Joseph Travis, "placed the greatest confidence in [him]," no doubt relying on Turner's intelligence and steadiness of character (Gray 138). What Travis does not read accurately, however, is Turner's refusal to accept the fact of slavery. From his childhood on, Turner believed himself "ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty" (Gray 135). Turner's "great purpose" is connected to religious fervor and incompatibility with slavery. The white slaveholders misread the text of Turner's "obedience" as submission to the state of slavery, whereas Turner suggests that he obeys a divine authority. For instance, when Turner runs away from the overseer, he returns a month later on the belief that God called him to return to the plantation (Gray 136). By focusing on what they perceive as docility, white slaveholders miss the signs of Turner's true ambitions, just as Pym misreads the docility of the islanders of Tsalal: "They uniformly behaved with the greatest decorum, aiding us with alacrity in our work, offering us their commodities frequently without price, and never, in any instance, pilfering a single article . . . The women especially were the most obliging in every respect" (Poe 538).

Yet, when the mistaken readings are revealed in unmistakably violent ways, white readers in each text shift the content of their readings from docility to treachery as the suddenly hostile descriptive language reveals. Gray refers to Turner and his fellow conspirators as "fiends," mentioning Turner's "fiend-like face" and the "fiend-like barbarity" of their deeds (Gray 147; 148). Pym uses similar language to describe the islanders: "In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive,

bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe" (Poe 556). In each of these instances, fear itself is used to elaborate race as a concept. These are not straight-forward accounts of particular, frightening events, but texts that work to produce the threat of blackness. As such, the texts serve as more than intellectual venues, but become operative in the world in material ways.

Both *The Confessions* and *Pym* demonstrate a tendency of slaveholders, and, indeed, the larger white antebellum culture to imagine slaves and freed blacks as representing one of two stereotypes, the docile, but ineffective Sambo, or the threatening, potentially violent Nat. John Blassingame confirms this observation: "antebellum whites apparently focused on two extreme forms of slave behavior—childlike docility and rebellion—in formulating the Nat and Sambo stereotypes" (237-38).[125] What is left out of each of these stereotypes are the *human* qualities of the individuals involved: the caprice, the nuance, the unexpected, all of those unquantifiable traits which make up the uniqueness of each individual. When Pym realizes his great mistake in reading the islanders as cooperative and begins to see them as dangerous, he muses on the crew's errors in judgment:

> When I now think of our egregious folly, the chief subject of astonishment seems to be, that we should have ever ventured, under any circumstances, so completely *into the power* of unknown savages as to permit them to march both before and behind us in our progress through this ravine. Yet such was the order we blindly took up, trusting foolishly to the force of our party, the unarmed condition of Too-wit and his men, the certain efficacy of our firearms . . . and, more than all to the long-sustained pretension of friendship kept up by these infamous wretches. (Poe 539; my italics)

Caught in a power dialectic, trapped in the limited discourse of Sambo/Nat, Pym is unable to view the crew's destruction as anything other than an overthrow, a loss of power. No sense of

[125] John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979). Sundquist points to Melville's incorporation of these two visions of black men in his depiction of Babo. *To Wake the Nations* 160.

the human violation committed by the white crew through willful exploitation of a people has reached him. He betrays no awareness that violence begets violence, and is simply stunned to discover that the weaponry advantage of the Westerners did not better serve them. Pym actually thinks their mistake here has been in trusting the islanders. Unable or unwilling to alter his own racist/expansionist perspective, what Dana Nelson describes as "white [is might] is right," Pym cannot move beyond the violence of Tsalal (99; brackets in original). The undescribed, but "distressing" death of Pym at the end of the novel should not surprise the reader, for Pym has no future, unable as he is to comprehend his own past (Poe 561).

Instead, Pym remains in precisely the same place of terror that held so many white Southerners following the Nat Turner rebellion. As one legislator to the Virginia assembly described the persistent threat posed by the revolt:

> The suspicion eternally attached to the slave himself, the suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that the same bloody deed could be acted over at any time and in any place, that the materials for it were spread through the land and always ready for a like explosion. Nothing but the force of this withering apprehension, nothing but the paralyzing and deadening weight with which it falls upon and prostrates the heart of every man who has helpless dependents to protect, nothing but this could have thrown a brave people into consternation, or could have made any portion of this Commonwealth, for a single instant, to have quailed and trembled. (qtd. in Blassingame 237)

The comments above dwell on fear of repetition of the events of August 22, 1831. What is most striking in this description is not the understandable fear, but the sense of perpetual present that threatens and lingers over the text. It is a presence of violence in the temporal present that will not be mollified. For a slaveholding South, by failing to understand, or even acknowledge, the issues at stake, Nat Turner's rebellion refuses to recede into the past, but remains a violent, haunting, ever-present.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that *Pym* is distinguished by its instances of unsettled readings throughout the text, either because too many interpretations are available or because Pym himself refuses to interpret, but instead insists on the self-evidence of Nature. At this point, I want to extend that analysis to include the recognition of *Pym* as a performative document of the threat posed by the black reading subject. By reading *The Confessions* alongside *Pym*, we will begin to see how Poe's novel shuts down reading, just at the moment the reader becomes reminiscent of Nat Turner, a black reading subject. On one level the text simply denies the black subject the opportunity to read, while on another level, the fact that *Pym* disallows reading at this crucial point concedes the threat of the black reading subject and claims reading as a powerful moment of subject formation.

In *The Confessions*, Turner explains[126] that he first learned to read and write, "with the most perfect ease" (Gray 134). Literacy seems to come naturally to him, with no awareness of particular study or effort in its pursuit, and he read frequently, "whenever an opportunity occurred of looking at a book" (Gray 134). Reading becomes a way of life for Turner, who applies this knowledge toward the Bible and, ultimately, to the visions and voices he experiences:

> And about this time I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it." . . . and [the Spirit] appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons. (Gray 136)

[126] Sunquist details the complications involved in reading Turner's Confessions for the authentic voice of Turner, given that the text is written and published by Gray, but Sundquist finds, nonetheless, "Turner's voice—and hence his thought, his vision, and his leadership—remains strongly present in the historic 'text'" (21). See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 36-56.

Turner speaks of his readings as revelations and they are always mediated through the "Spirit." At times, however, he reveals an awareness of his own interpretive acts, such as when he prays for "certainty of the meaning" of the signs he finds (Gray 137). When Turner finds "drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven" and, on some leaves, "hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures [he] had seen before in the heavens," his sense of mission increases (Gray 137). It is as though, the acts of reading the "signs" create in him an awareness of his own power and agency, or, rather, an agency he puts at the service of God. Turner determines to act as soon as the "signs" make themselves known to him, and "on the appearance of the sign . . . slay [his] enemies with their own weapons" (Gray 138). The "signs" Turner reads—blood on the corn, hieroglyphics on the leaves, the eclipse of the sun—are all natural objects that, to Turner's belief, have been manipulated in some way by God's intervention. God's message must be discovered in the natural world which surrounds Turner. Thus, *The Confessions* serves as an exemplary document where the first portion is about the centrality of reading to acquiring subjectivity and the second portion deals with the violence that results from large-scale denial of subjectivity.

Unlike Turner's eagerness to read the signs he believes have been sent to him from God, Pym resists reading as much as possible once he reaches Tsalal. As I have argued previously, Pym's own interpretive process becomes more and more constrained as the novel progresses until he blatantly refuses to interpret the chasm writing. Despite Peters's recognition of the carvings in the rock as inscriptions, Pym maintains that they are mere accidents of Nature. Not to make the point too fine, but it is curious to note that Pym's refusal to read reaches its most extreme form only after the novel has imaginatively journeyed into the regions of racial

difference, mass-scale violence, and the reading of signs from nature. That is, once *Pym* has chartered into the territory of *The Confessions*, reading breaks down. As *Pym* figuratively reaches the threat posed by the black reading subject, Pym's reading ceases. Following this interpretation, Pym's eagerness to put aside Peters' interest in the rock carvings takes on new significance, as Peters himself is a racial Other, of mixed Native American/white ancestry. As the editor of the "Note" which follows Pym's narrative informs us, Peters "cannot be met with at present" (561). Dana Nelson explains: "The last chapters and the note emphasize how authority is established in colonial literature by limiting the structure of representation to a speaking, white Subject and a voiceless, dark Other, and by naturalizing this arbitrary division and silence" (105). Peters'account is always delayed, always pushed out of the narrative. As a racial Other, Peters' reading threatens the integrity of Pym's (white, racist, expansionist) text and cannot be contained within it.

Gray describes Turner as being "wrapt in mystery" (129). Gray, no doubt, had his own shrewd marketing reasons for continuing to play up the confusion surrounding the uprising and the interest it generated in Nat Turner. By simultaneously laying Turner's confessions out before the public as a transparent document, but also coding this document with his own commentary, Gray styles *The Confessions* as both confessionary and sensational, revelatory and concealing. But despite the great deal of public interest in Nat Turner and his motives, the mystery here is not only the violence unforeseen, but also a stunning incomprehension of the role chattel slavery plays in producing a Nat Turner. *Pym*, too, partakes of this sense of mystery and thematizes it. Mystery enters Poe's text as the *Grampus* proceeds south. By the time crew reach the island of Tsalal, the mysterious and unfamiliar take center stage: the water, the wildlife, and even the people are odd to the eyes of the crew. The inscrutable inscriptions in the chasms add more

mystery and confusion to a place that proves incomprehensible by the crew. But Pym's inability to make sense of events on the island is preceded by his refusal to read. Pym shuts down his own ability to interpret in order to avoid a self-critical knowing. Consequently, the white mist that subsumes the small boat of Pym, Peters, and the hostage, Nu-Nu, is the mist of incomprehension, of un-knowing, the white mist of white refusal to read the "signs" of white racist exploitation and violence.[127]

The 1831 court documents that record the execution order of Nat Turner conclude with the following words: "Therefore it is considered by the Court that he be taken hence to the Jail from whence he was taken therein, to remain until Friday the 11th day of November instant, on which day between the hours of ten o'clock in the forenoon and four o'clock in the afternoon he is to be taken by the Sheriff to the usual place of execution and then and there be hanged by the neck until he be dead.—And the Court valued the said slave Nat to the sum of three hundred and seventy-five dollars."[128] I take the time to quote from this document, not only to highlight the extraordinary gap between the cold, legalistic language of the text and the warm, lived reality of the historical Nat Turner, but to draw attention to the juxtaposition of ideas here. First, we read the actual order of execution of Nat Turner, complete with all the particulars of time and place. This order is followed by an appraisal of Nat Turner as property. State-sanctioned violence, in the form of the execution order, precedes the appraisal, linking violence and economics in the

[127] Paul John Eakin argues that Poe's endings have to do, primarily, with the "soul's quest for final knowledge" and that the indeterminate ending of *Pym* demonstrates "Poe's daring attempts to construct a fiction commensurate to final knowledge" (4, 22). While I agree that *Pym* is a text consumed with the idea of *knowledge*—the use and acquisition of knowledge, our systems of making and disseminating meaning—what strikes me most forcefully is the ultimate refusal to know and be known that dominates the ending of the novel. *Pym* is not so much a quest *for* knowledge as a journey to avoid a knowing which casts doubt on the world as "known," contemporary antebellum society. See Paul John Eakin, "Poe's Sense of an Ending," *American Literature* 45.1 (1973): 1-22.

[128] "Trial of Nat Turner, Southampton County, 5 November 1831." Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia. *Death or Liberty Exhibit: Gabriel, Nat Turner, and John Brown.* Jan.10, 2000—Nov. 8, 2000. Univ. of Virginia. Web. 20 Sept. 2007.

Southern slave-state in a telling conjunction. That the last official word on Turner, a man who lived, who worked, who wrought terrifying violence on an entire community, and a troubling, lasting legacy upon another, could be a valuation of his life in monetary terms, speaks volumes of the unsaid about what Frederick Douglass calls the "soul-killing" effect of slavery on both the slaves and their masters.

"Blood . . . how trebly full of import"

Blood figures prominently in Poe's text both literally and figuratively. From the graphic violence of the mutiny scene, to Augustus' blood scrawled note, to the massacre on Tsalal, the motif of race as blood resonates throughout *Pym*. In each of these passages, bloodiness and bloodletting hint at the broader significance of the trope of race as blood, or race as "biological" "fact."

As the 1820s and '30s wore on, the idea of innate racial differences gained more and more scientific acceptance, supported largely by the work of American phrenologists and later, ethnologists. As we saw in chapter one, phrenologists argued that an individual's intelligence could be gauged by taking measurements of the person's skull, for the skull served as an outward sign of what lay within.[129] Therefore, they contended the intellectual capacity of an individual could be determined by the physical structure of the skull which houses the brain, comprised of various centers which control the thoughts, feelings, and interests of the individual. Education could develop the mind of an individual, but could never take it beyond its biological limits, read

[129] For more about scientific racism, including the work of Samuel Morton, as a background for *Pym* and "Some Words With a Mummy" (1845), see Jared Gardner, *Master Plots: Race and the Founding of an American Literature, 1787–1845* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 125–59; and Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 206–16.

in the shape and size of the skull. Moreover, the phrenologists contended, the skulls of nonwhites showed telltale signs of their inferiority. Racial differences in the shapes and sizes of heads were indicators that nonwhites could never reach the intellectual level of whites (Horsman 120-123).[130]

What is most significant about phrenology, in terms of the development of racialist thought in America, is its insistence on innate racial differences that are marked on the body and carried down by individuals through race, and the fact that these ideas had the backing of the scientific establishment.[131] Even after phrenology began to stray into the realm of fortune-telling in the 1840s and lost its scientific acceptance, it continued to enjoy a popular interest and enthusiasm in America. Richard Colfax's 1833 pamphlet, *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists* . . . exemplifies the kinds of racist arguments which phrenology fueled and Frederick Douglass spoke out against. Colfax declares that the facial angle of blacks was "almost to a level with that of the brute" and that "the acknowledged meanness of the Negro's intellect only coincides with the shape of his head" (25-26).[132] By early to mid-century, the notion of racial difference had become commonplace, as well as the assumption of the existence of racial "types," or representative racial features. Furthermore, these racial features could be relied upon to identify the relative worth, intelligence, and morality of the bearer, at a glance.

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[130] Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

[131] Stephen Jay Gould argues that nineteenth century naturalists, not surprisingly, held racial views typical of their day. However, these views, drawn largely from popular opinion, rather than objective evidence, served as the very evidence popular opinion drew on: "the pervasive assent given by scientists to conventional [racial] rankings arose from shared social belief, not from objective data gathered to test an open question. Yet, in a curious case of reversed causality, these pronouncements were read as independent support for the political context" (Gould 66). See Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man (*New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

[132] Richard Colfax, *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York 1833) 25-26.

Pym provides an example of this racial type-casting in the description of Dirk Peters, the "half-breed." Pym describes Peters in racial and phrenological terms. He focuses on the size and shape of Peters' head, making special mention of his "deformity" and "deficiency": "His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency, which did not proceed from old age, he usually wore a wig formed of any hair-like material which presented itself—occasionally the skin of a Spanish dog or American grizzly bear. At the time spoken of he had on a portion of one of these bearskins; and it added no little to the natural ferocity of his countenance, which betook of the Upsaroka character" (Poe 459). The larger passage from which this excerpt is taken dwells on the ferocity and immense physical strength of Peters. Through Pym's description, Peters becomes the nonwhite Other, the Indian "savage" and the dark, menacing "negro." This characterization becomes significant later in the story, when Pym is threatened by the reading Peters provides.

The popularization of the main tenets of phrenology seemed to provide a kind of scientific evidence to the assertion of innate racial difference. Following the 1831-1832 debates in the Virginia legislature over gradual emancipation of slaves, a plethora of Southern discourse defending slavery made use of the widely accepted idea that blacks were inferior to whites, not on the basis of education or economics, but on racial differences alone.[133] William Drayton's *The South Vindicated . . .* is one such example.[134] Drayton argues:

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[133] George Frederickson emphasizes the speed with which this propaganda machine went into action: "there is something startling about the rapidity with which [previous justifications of slavery] were brought together and organized in a rigid polemical pattern, once the defenders of slavery found themselves in a propaganda war with the abolitionists" (49). See Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[134] The full title of the text referenced is *The South Vindicated From the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists*. It was originally published anonymously, but has since been attributed by scholars to William

> The more I have travelled, the more I am convinced *that the races of men form the great secret of history and manners.* Man is not so capable of education as philosophers imagine. The influence of governments and laws has less power, radically, than is supposed, over the manners and instincts of any people, while the primitive constitution and the blood of the race always have their influence and manifest themselves, thousands of years afterwards, in the physical formations and moral habits of a particular family or tribe (qtd. in "Paulding-Drayton" review; italics in original).[135]

Drayton's words underscore the belief many held that one's biological make-up was the primary determining factor in one's life career. Even more than that, biology, more so than education or law, determines the pursuits of an entire group of people, a "race." Bringing together the belief in innate racial differences with scientific validation is the term *blood*, as in "the blood of the race." Invoking the term blood in this context is to invoke all of the resonances of the word, imbued as it is with the sense of essence, or source of life, and, hence, with all of the mystery that a return to the source connotes. Blood, as a term, is key to elaborating and combining the determined, fixed, immutable quality of race, as biological difference, with a more bodily, more essential, more mysterious notion, as well, the "treble import" Pym describes.

Race as Color

In his *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, Thomas R. Dew, an influential proslavery apologist, opposed emancipation of slaves on the grounds that

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Drayton, a South Carolina judge and U.S. congressman who helped Poe during his tenure in Philadelphia. In 1840, Poe dedicated *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* to him.

[135] This passage is quoted from an April 1836 review published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* during the time Poe served as editor. The 1836 author favorably reviews two pro-slavery texts: J.K. Paulding's *Slavery in the United States* and *The South Vindicated* . . . . The authorship of the article, referred to by scholars as the "Paulding-Drayton" review, is disputed. Some scholars attribute the review to Beverley Tucker, a regular contributor to the *Messenger*, and some attribute the review to Poe. This passage can be found quoted in "Slavery," *Southern Literary Messenger* 2 (1836) : 336-39.

freed slaves would remain in Virginia and be unable to provide for themselves. For, according to Dew, "the emancipated black carries a mark which no time can erase; he forever wears the indelible symbol of his inferior condition; the *Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots*" (103; italics in original).[136] Not only is the "inferiority" of people of color taken for granted in this excerpt, but so is the notion that one's skin color is indicative of one's relative worth, with paler skin colors, presumably, indicating superiority and darker skin colors "indelibly" marking inferiority. Skin color becomes an inescapable destiny, it would seem, a mark, forever, of observable racial difference. In Dew's formulation, blackness itself is the justification for slavery. Even if freed, blacks would remain "inferior," Dew contends, and, therefore, should not be freed, but continue as slaves.

Yet, despite Dew's insistence on the inferiority of blacks and the indelibility of skin color as a mark of this insufficiency, color and race were more slippery concepts than proslavery strategists liked to admit. For one thing, race, as defined by skin color alone, was a tricky category by the nineteenth century. With over one hundred years of slavery behind them, most slaves in the antebellum period were American-born and their ancestry was often of mixed African and European-American lineages. As early as 1662, Virginia slave code established that slavery was hereditary and outlawed miscegenation.[137] Other slave states followed suit to insure that slavery was a hereditary condition and that the children of slave mothers would be held as slaves even if their fathers were whites. In 1853, abolitionist William Goodell writes: "In all

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[136] Thomas R. Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond, 1832) 103.

[137] There is debate among scholars regarding the exact status of the slave in seventeenth century America, particularly in Virginia. Black slaves may have initially held a position similar to that of white indentured servants. Yet, by the start of the eighteenth century, blacks were defined as slaves in perpetuity. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordon, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976) 31-33. For information about the anxiety around and prohibition of miscegenation, see Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattos in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

these [slave codes] it is laid down that the *child* follows the condition of *the mother*, whoever the *father* may be! The same usage, whether with or without written law, prevails in all our slave States; and under its sanction, the slave 'owner' very frequently holds and sells his own children as 'property,' though sometimes as white as himself" (248-49; italics in original).[138] Because skin color was not quite as "indelible" a mark as Dew would have us believe, at least in the case of generation to generation, and because many blacks were light-skinned enough to "pass" as whites, laws defining slavery as hereditary according to the mother's status were passed. As Joan Dayan explains, the "concept of blackness had to be reinforced, made absolute and unchangeable against the prima facie evidence of fading color, and the strategy was to call this idea *blood*" (202). The "law of reversion" in the slave states "certified the futility of trying to remove blackness, even the least molecule of black blood, by successive alliances with whites" (Dayan 201-2).[139] The very quantity and complexity of the slave codes reveal not only the difficulties of managing the slave system, but also the degree to which the slave codes are in the process of producing the very categories they purport to describe: "slave," "Negro," etc. In the same vein, the discourse surrounding slavery did not so much depict slavery as help to produce it, not so much portray blackness, as manufacture it.

Poe's *Pym* participates in the production of blackness, performing race as color, as physical, observable sign of difference. If we take a moment to consider the visual motifs produced by Poe's text, what dominates is a pattern of alternation between images of blackness

[138] William Goodell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts* (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853) 248-49.

[139] Joan Dayan, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 179-209.

or darkness and predominantly white visual images.[140] For example, the novel begins in darkness. Pym and Augustus are surrounded by darkness as they take the *Ariel* out for a drunken nighttime sail. Next, Pym boards the *Grampus* under cover of a thick, white fog. He hides in the darkness of the ship's hull. Frantically, he tries to read a sheet of blank, white paper, but his light goes out and Pym is again plunged into darkness. After the mutiny and shipwreck, Pym and Peters are rescued by the *Jane Guy* and begin a journey southward, to an increasingly white snowy and icy landscape. Then they land upon the island of Tsalal where everything is black, including the "blackness of darkness which envelops" Pym and Peters when the rock fissure caves in and, finally, Pym's adventures end with a canoe journey into a white vapor and the sighting of a "human figure," whose skin's hue "was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (Poe 540; 560).

This alternation between the motifs of black and white, black and white serves to underscore the concept of color as visual image, if this imagery doesn't also go on to draw out the bifurcation of southern, and indeed, American, political life into starkly visual and literal terms.[141] The "blackness of darkness" that threatens Pym and Peters is a specifically *black* kind of dimness. The cave-in scene immediately precedes Pym's awareness of the crew's massacre at the hands of the "black skin warriors." As an image, blackness suggested the most fearsome and

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[140] John Carlos Rowe notes the play of lightness and darkness in *Pym* as images of textuality, in a space "implicitly textual" (99). Henry Louis Gates points to the importance of themes of black and white to the structure of American gothic texts (50-51). See John Carlos Rowe, "Writing and Truth in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 91-110; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

[141] Louis Rubin, Jr. cautions against trying to read Poe's work in direct correlation to the topic of slavery, advising that we "dismiss the notion of conscious intention or one-for-one allegorical relationships" and look, instead, to a "complex emotional and psychological response" to the experience of growing up in a "slaveholding household in which his status and identity were sometimes painfully oblique" (177). Nonetheless, Rubin reads the cave-in scene in *Pym* as "directly linked to the *fear of blacks*—in other words, to slave insurrection" (172; italics in original). See Rubin, *The Edge of the Swamp*.

threatening, the lowest and most despicable.[142] To invoke blackness, in this field of signification, is to invoke a whole host of reprehensible associations. That Poe's text should be patterned as a kind of play between images of blackness and whiteness does not prove anything conclusively about the author's intentions or awareness in so doing. This kind of "chiaroscuro color coding," Leland Person argues "was so deeply ingrained in the American imagination that its particular reference to race could be repressed" (211).[143] Nonetheless, color as race, and race as the grand demarcator of social, political, and legal existence become the operative terms of Poe's novel to whatever degree Poe sought to foreground, reinforce, or challenge these conditions.

Africanism and the Power of Reading

In the stellar, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison contends that "[n]o early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32). "Africanism," as Morrison uses the term, is the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (6-7). Africanism is a rendering of a white, American culture's deepest anxieties about itself, Morrison suggests: "[t]he fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of

[142] "Blackness," Winthrop Jordon explains, "had become so thoroughly entangled with the basest status in American society that at least by the beginning of the eighteenth century it was almost indecipherably coded into American language and literature" (258). See Jordan *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: Norton, 1977).

[143] Leland S. Person, "Poe's Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales, *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 205-224.

perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity" (17). Following Morrison, then, we can read in Poe's depiction of blackness a great deal of fear—of duplicity, of violence, of incoherence. Each of these fears can tell us something about Poe's own anxieties and those of the culture to which he belonged.

What is most interesting, to my view, is that each represents an uncertainty at the heart of language and signification, while simultaneously depicting racialist thought. The fear of duplicity Poe depicts in the massacre on Tsalal can be read as fear of black, slave insurrection or, to a lesser degree, concern about slave (dis)loyalty. It can also be read as anxiety about the duplicity of the sign itself. What of the gap between sign and signified? How reliable, authentic, accurate can language be in bridging the gap? The fear of violence is, again, alarm about slave insurrection, but also apprehension about the violence of the text itself. What damage do the failings of language do? In what ways does the text do violence to a purer notion of the sign, or the Idea? And, lastly, the fear of incoherence Poe illustrates is portrayed through the constant "jabbering" of the natives and the general mismanagement they seem to suffer from:

> The whole surface of the bay was literally strewn with the struggling and drowning wretches, and on shore matters were even worse. They seemed utterly appalled by the suddenness and completeness of their discomfiture, and made no efforts at assisting one another. At length we observed a total change in their demeanour. From absolute stupor they appeared to be, all at once, aroused to the highest pitch of excitement, and rushed wildly about . . . (Poe 547)

Moreover, this fear of incoherence can also be read as a literal fear of incoherence, the fear that all language and texts are just as uncommunicative as the "jabbering" of the islanders.

I have suggested above that Poe's portrayal of blackness represents both racialist thinking and worry about language itself, and particularly the role of reading in dissemination of a text. But what I want to argue is that these two readings do not simply exist side-by-side by chance.

The fact that both interpretations are viable in and through the same images, tropes, and motifs says something, not only about the textuality of how blackness is portrayed, but it reveals something fundamental about "blackness" itself: blackness is a text. *Pym* serves as example *par excellence* of Morrison's Africanism. What is more, if Africanism reveals more about the (white) culture that produces it than about the (black) persons a text depicts, more about the author's anxieties than those of his characters, then Poe's Africanism, Poe's depictions of blackness in *Pym*, tells us most about his trepidations involving the reader, the writer's Other. By imbuing the reader with Otherness, by employing the tropes of Africanism, Poe depicts a threatening black Other who is also the reader. But this depiction holds other opportunities, as well. For, in exposing the threat (imagined as the threat of difference/blackness/Otherness) posed by the reader, the workings of a cultural hegemony are also exposed, and the possibilities of a kind of reading based in recognition, rather than difference become imaginable.

Poe's "The Power of Words" (1845) may just be one such imagining. The short story postulates that words themselves have the power to create physical, material reality. Shortly after the destruction of the earth, an angel, Agathos, schools Oinos, a new angel, in the infinity and inexhaustibility of knowledge. He explains that all creation, except the first creation, occurs through the "mediate or indirect, not as the direct or immediate results of the Divine creative power," but through a kind of ripple effect of the "air," as all movement, all thought, all words cause vibrations which extend out to eternity, touching and changing all things as they pass by (Poe 399).[144] Agathos's words speak a star into being: "This wild star . . . I spoke it—with a few passionate sentences—into birth" (Poe 401).

[144] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Power of Words," *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004) 398-401. Subsequent quotations from Poe are all to "The Power of Words."

Poe's story highlights not only the powers inherent in authorship, but also the powers inherit in readership. Oinos's reading of the star, the text of Agathos's loss, unlike any other statement made in the story, establishes a direct, intimate connection between Oinos and Agathos:

> *Oinos.* . . . Its brilliant flowers look like a fairy dream—but its fierce volcanoes like the passions of a turbulent heart.
> *Agathos.* They *are*!—they *are*! This wild star—it is now three centuries since, with clasped hands, and with streaming eyes, at the feet of my beloved—I spoke it—with a few passionate sentences—into birth. Its brilliant flowers *are* the dearest of all unfulfilled dreams, and its raging volcanoes *are* the passions of the most turbulent and unhallowed of hearts. (Poe 401)

If the *physical* powers of reading are not emphasized in this passage, surely the emotional and psychological powers of reading are. For the first time, Agathos betrays passion and a form of existence beyond the cold rationality of his current angelic state. Something peculiarly *human* seems to attach to reading, some form of empathy or understanding, but also an acknowledgment of the substantial power of identification. Oinos's reading of Agathos's star acts not only as a recognition of Agathos's pain, but also as a revelation of pain as a creative energy of the universe. Oinos's reading of the star, along with Agathos's confessions, force a revised understanding of the angels' previous conversation. It is an act of reading that reveals pain as a primary force in the universe and words as the principal means of expression of that pain. "The Power of Words" suggests that each word, written or spoken, has transformative, physical effects upon the universe, but also that identification is crucial to successful reading.

Pym, on the other hand, dramatizes a version of reading based in difference. For *Pym* performs a notion of race as a category drawn, meaningfully, by skin color. That is, in *Pym*, a character's race is indicative of his characteristics. The dark-skinned Tsalalians, for instance, Pym assures us "appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and

altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe" (Poe *Pym* 556). In antebellum America, color becomes the observable sign of an enforced political difference. Race is a fiction that is performed by an entire culture and its legal system. It is a fiction that supports a power hierarchy that reserves its highest positions for white males and its lowest for black women and children. That Poe's fiction, among others, participates in this performance is not so much a wonder as the very liberating opportunities Poe's text concedes to the act of reading. If *Pym* performs unsettled reading—failures to read, as well as, failings of reading—it does so at the cost of revealing the possibilities reading holds for those willing to claim subjectivity—black or white alike—and read in and through a text something of themselves, some identification which authorizes a reader's own performances.

Reading Freedom: Composing the Self in Frederick Douglass's Autobiographies and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

As we have seen, Poe's *Pym* responds to the threat of the black reading subject by limiting the act of reading. In contrast, this chapter will demonstrate that the texts of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs embrace the act of reading and expand the parameters (and responsibilities) normally attributed to it. For both Douglass and Jacobs, reading is a political activity in that it requires engagement and political action.

What Douglass offers is a program for successful, black reading. By casting aside white reading strategies that rely on the black body as a text for white consumption, exploitation, and signification, Douglass creates instead a reading strategy embodied within the black, male body. When Garrison and other white readers take Douglass "as [their] text," Douglass responds by fully inhabiting the very body under discussion. By occupying the space of his own subjectivity, Douglass is able to refute the limited and limiting conception of his slave body as simply a text for interpretation and resignify it to his own ends. For Douglass, the black, masculine body is the shape of active, successful reading.

Jacobs insists on the authority of her slave experience, in opposition to cultural stereotypes of the black, slave body as by definition, unreliable. Rather, the point of unreliability in Jacobs's text is the reader herself. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) posits a model of reading which relies on an identification between reader and text and mutual acknowledgment, much like the model suggested in Poe's "The Power of Words." Successful reading across racial and class lines fails, however. For Jacobs, the failure to read, the failure to truly connect is the very point of the narration. Only in this failure to read, can Jacobs reveal

what is foundational to the failure, slavery itself. It is not simply a matter of poor reading strategies or practices that unsettles the reader, *Incidents* suggests, but the deeper problematic of how knowledge functions within a culture and society. *Incidents* asks antebellum America (and, equally, contemporary audiences) to know that which it refuses to know about itself and to reconsider what it does with the knowledge(s) it thinks it possesses.

Self-Made Man: Reading/Writing Frederick Douglass

Putnam's Monthly Magazine's anonymous 1855 reviewer of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), acknowledges that Douglass's story draws interest because of the astoundingly unlikely series of events of which it is comprised. What stuns the reviewer most of all is the degree of education Douglass achieved: "The mere fact that the member of an outcast and enslaved race should accomplish his freedom, and educate himself up to an equality of intellectual and moral vigor with the leaders of the race by which he was held in bondage, is, in itself, so remarkable, that the story of the change cannot be otherwise than exciting" (30).[145] Douglass's literacy, a literacy he managed to gain while enslaved, fascinates Douglass's contemporaries and continues to engage twenty-first century readers of Douglass's work. For nineteenth century readers of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845) or one of his subsequent autobiographies, the very fact that a former slave, a black man, could read and write was startling and surprising.

[145] Review of "The Life and Bondage of Frederick Douglass" *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 7 (Nov. 1855), 547. reprinted in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 30-31.

Such a sentiment can easily be attributed to white readers' racist assumptions about the intellectual capacities of blacks, but as Annette Niemtzow points out, twenty-first century readers, perhaps less likely to espouse racist views of African-Americans, are just as likely to find themselves marveling over Douglass's literacy. Niemtzow explains that for the slave narrator, one of the key difficulties in establishing an 'I' with which to tell one's tale is that the writer must recreate through memory a depiction of his or her slave self while at the same time lay claim to another speaking/writing self. The discrepancy between the two selves "is often so intense that the reader, black or white, cries out, in a confusion that suggests the power of the narratives, 'How could this person have been a slave?' . . . Our cry is both one of sympathy against the institution of slavery as we acknowledge the achievement of the autobiographer and a cry of disbelief in the possibility that a slave could become the autobiographer. . . . the reader's disbelief is a tribute to the author of the slave narrative, for the doubting reader is inevitably at one with the doubting writer" (Niemtzow 97).[146]

As a speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass experienced this precise difficulty. In developing himself as a public lecturer, Douglass's fluency and rhetorical ability increased to the point that audiences could no longer see him as a former slave. Douglass tells us in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "People doubted if I had ever been a slave. They said I did not talk like a slave, look like a slave, nor act like a slave, and that they believed I had never been south of the Mason-Dixon line" (214).[147] The doubts expressed by Douglass' white audience represent a confluence of several key issues. First, they doubt his veracity, the

[146] Annette Niemtzow. "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative." *The Art of Slave Narrative* Eds. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner. (Macomb: Western Illinois U, 1982) 96-109.

[147] Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom. The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Oxford UP. 164-222. All quotations from *Bondage and Freedom* are to this edition, unless otherwise specified.

accuracy of his claim to have been a slave, but more interestingly, they doubt his performance because he does not talk, look, or "act" in the ways they believe slaves should behave. What is at issue here is not only Douglass' physical presence and oral performance, but also the interpretive strategies by which his audience evaluates him and the conventional codes on which they base their judgments. When Douglass writes his *Narrative* four years later, he authenticates his tale with the names, dates, places of the people, events, and locales of his life. This authentication was a convention of slave narratives, not only to establish the author's veracity, but also because the authentication technique had become one of the codes by which readers interpreted the text.

The move from oral performance to print text, the move from listeners to readers, is not one without significance or consequence. Douglass' representation of himself in oral performance versus Douglass' representation of himself in narrative require distinctly different strategies, but as we can see, each depends on its audience, as listeners or readers, to complete its meaning-making. Both listeners and readers interpret through a set of codes that influence how they understand the matter of the text, whether oral or written. In examining the passage above, we note the white audience's "reading" of Douglass' black, male body which, for them, does not equate to "slave." Framing the audience's interpretation of Douglass' speech as "reading" may seem to elide the very different acts of seeing, listening, and reading. My goal here is not to gloss over the differences between these separate acts or to gloss over Douglass' distinct acts of speaking and writing, but to draw attention to the common act of interpretation involved in each. This is not to say that the interpretation of Douglass' speaking body is exactly the same process as the interpretation of Douglass' written *Narrative*, but it is to suggest that Douglass' narration of his speaking engagement within the text of *Bondage and Freedom* is a specific narrative

gesture, the significance of which should not be ignored. In choosing to narrate this particular incident, Douglass places within his print text an act of interpretive listening (as he does more explicitly with the slave songs) which calls attention to the methods by which we interpret texts and he figures these various forms of interpretation as forms of, specifically, reading.

In the case of Douglass' speech, the text under discussion is not simply his voice, but his speaking *body*, a fugitive body in peril. Douglass records that John Collins, general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, introduces Douglass at anti-slavery lectures as: "'a graduate from the peculiar institution,' Mr. Collins used to say . . . '*with my diploma written on my back*!'" (*Bondage and Freedom* 212; italics in original). The comparison of the black body with a written text is one Douglass makes use of here and elsewhere within his autobiographies. As I have argued in chapter one, reading was an operative metaphor for the representation of race within racial discourse. Douglass' choice to deploy the metaphor of the body as a text, this time for the purpose of establishing his speaking authority in a black, fugitive slave body, disputes the joint notions of race as a visual text and of blackness as inferiority. In a comparison that neatly brings together the very issues which challenge the slave narrator to write a self in the face of a discursive resistance to black selfhood, Douglass claims, not only the authority to speak, but authority to write, as well, and with the assumption of authority, he opens his text to interpretation, "putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story" (*Bondage and Freedom* 214).

Writing long before W. E. B. DuBois coined the explanatory phrase "double consciousness" to describe the sense of doubled awareness African-Americans must cope with in a dominant, white culture, slave narrators forged the literary forms and traditions later writers would inherit. Douglass details the slave's need to conceal his thoughts from his white

neighbors. He tells the story of a slave who answered his "master" honestly when asked if he were treated well. Two weeks later the Maryland slave was sold deeper South to a Georgia trader. Douglass informs his readers: "This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions" (40).[148] Consequently, many slaves learned quickly how to present one face to the whites around them and another toward trusted friends and family in the slave quarters: "The frequency of [punishment] has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it" (Douglass 40). Niemtzow's insight into the slave narrative's reader's disbelief draws attention to the experience of the reader, regardless of race and regardless of the time/place/context of the reading. The duality of the slave narrator, the sense of doubleness, is an essential and inescapable facet of the narration, for both the writer and reader.

For the writers of slave narratives, this doubled persona became part of the text, not only because narrators were not exempt, even in the pages of their own narratives, from the pressures and prescriptives of the larger, white society, but also because the very act of writing a public document through the eye of the witness required the production of an "I," a witness. Given the fact that antebellum African-Americans were not considered legal witnesses in court, even on their own behalf, the author of the slave narrative had a difficult task ahead. The narrator had to establish the authenticity of his/her experience as a slave, the proof of which was often the verisimilitude of the tale itself and the imaginative recreation of a slave self to give witness, at

[148] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader.* Ed. William L. Andrews. (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 21-98. All quotations from the *Narrative* are from this edition.

the same time he/she distinguished a self from the slave and produced a literate, speaking, writing, persona that would be recognized as a public persona, a person, not property.

For the former slave writing of his or her life in bondage, the ability to recreate details of that slave history in a format that was intelligible and persuasive to white antebellum audiences was crucial to the ultimate success of the project: to inspire white readers to oppose slavery and actively work for its end. Yet, slave narratives, as realistic accounts of their authors' lives, have often been read through the conventions of autobiography. Like the 1855 reviewer of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it can be tempting to view Douglass's transformation from slave to rhetorically gifted political activist as a kind of rags-to-riches story, or as the ultimate account of the self-made man, a reading of himself, incidentally, that Douglass embraced increasingly throughout his long career as a public figure. *Putnam's Monthly* even goes so far as to unselfconsciously class Douglass in an historical line of white, Western self-made men:

> Our English literature has recorded many an example of genius struggling against adversity,--of the poor Ferguson, for instance, making himself an astronomer, of Burns becoming a poet, of Hugh Miller finding his geology in a stone quarry, and a thousand similar cases—yet none of these are so impressive as the case of the solitary slave, in a remote district, surrounded by none but enemies, conceiving the project of his escape, teaching himself to read and write to facilitate it, accomplishing it at last, and subsequently raising himself to a leadership in a great movement on behalf of his brethren. Whatever may be our opinions of slavery . . . we cannot but admire the force and integrity of character which has enabled Frederick Douglass to attain his present unique position. (31)[149]

But slave narratives, unlike autobiography, are always political projects, which dictates not only the aim of the text—to end slavery—but as James Olney reminds us, to a large extent, the form or genre of the former slave's text.

[149] *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. Reprinted in Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative.*

Slave narratives were formulaic, adhering to specific conventions that often served to demonstrate the veracity of the text. As Olney argues that what distinguishes slave narratives from autobiography is not the individuality or uniqueness of the texts, but their shared features and similarities. Claims like, "Written by Himself" in the title of the work, testimonials or introductions written by white abolitionists to assert the truthfulness of the text which follows, authenticating documents like marriage certificates, bills of sale, newspapers clippings, etc. and a formulaic narrative beginning with "'I was born . . .,' then specifying a place but not a date of birth" all work to confirm the accuracy of the slave narrative (Olney 153).[150] Olney stresses that these similarities result primarily from the goal or object of slave narratives, the "very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition" (154). Douglass's *Narrative*, Olney explains, "paradoxically transcends the slave narrative mode while being . . . its fullest, most exact representative" (153-54).

For the author of a slave narrative, authorship involved not only the rhetorical and textual challenges of writing, but also the (illegal) seizure of a language, a genre, and a public and political identity; in the process, a new literary tradition was forged. This tradition, fashioned by the slave narratives, emphasized the importance of literacy, connecting literacy to freedom. Olney refers to "literacy, identity, and freedom, the omnipresent thematic trio of the most important slave narratives" (158). Calling Douglass the autobiographer "par excellence" of the African-American tradition, a representative position in which Douglass was often cast, even in his own day, Olney insists that readers recognize the political dimensions of slave narratives as

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[150] Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. 148-174. Subsequent citations of Olney are to this article, until otherwise noted.

autobiography. For instance, like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, the title of Douglass's autobiography includes the phrase "written by himself." Yet, Olney points out that for Douglass, the inclusion of this phrase is no mere editorial addition, but a radical statement of Douglass's agency and authorship, even to those "abolitionists who were too often inclined to confuse sponsorship with authorship" (Olney 5).[151]

Beyond and apart from technical mastery of the properties of formal language, the social and cultural absence of images of black selfhood required the development of a black literary voice with which to speak for the entire race. Arguing that we must recognize the influence the slave narrative has had on the subsequent African-American literary tradition and also consider the conditions under which slave narratives were initially written and read—as political texts—Henry Louis Gates, Jr. underscores the degree of self-creation involved in the writing of the slave narrative. To a large extent, black persons were not socially or intellectually legitimated except through the written word: "The slave narrative represents the attempts of blacks to *write themselves into being*. What a curious idea: through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could become a human being by an act of self-creation through the mastery of language" (Gates xxiii; italics in original).[152] As Douglass quickly realized, it was easier to learn to read and write than it was to materialize, for the minds of white audiences, an authoritative, politically-empowered African-American speaker. The potential of language and literacy alone to construct an African-American identity that had public presence and political consequence, may have been more illusory than real. Nonetheless, Douglass spoke

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[151] Olney, James. "The Founding Fathers—Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington." *Slavery and the Literary Imagination.* Eds. McDowell and Rampersad.

[152] Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Introduction. *The Slave's Narrative.*

within an abolitionist circuit that had a public following and wrote within a form, the slave narrative, that offered an opportunity to write in a political mode. Stephen Butterfield points out that black autobiography, and the slave narrative in particular, has often been conceived as the writing of "a conscious political identity" with "ties and responsibilities to other members" of the group (3).[153] Gates connects this need to speak for all to the development of literary forms which allowed the individual's voice to speak for the group as well: "The narrated 'eye' was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual 'I' of the black author, as well as the collective 'I' of the race. Text created author, and black authors hoped they would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse. The very *face* of the race, representations of whose features were common in all sorts of writings about blacks at that time, was contingent upon the recording of the black *voice*" (xxvi; italics in original).[154] That is, the public perception of African-Americans relied tremendously on depictions of blacks in print. African-American authors like Douglass lost no time in realizing that their words were often taken by white audiences as representative of the race. Douglass embraced this position and vows at the end of *Bondage and Freedom*: "to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race" (222).

Houston Baker, Jr., too, speaks of the slave's need to create a public identity through language: "His being had to erupt from nothingness. Only by grasping the word could he engage in speech acts that would ultimately define his selfhood" (97).[155] Yet, Baker expresses concerns that once the slave speaks in the language of the oppressor, some part of the "authentic"

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[153] See Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1974.

[154] Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*.

[155] Baker, Houston A., Jr. "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass.* Ed. William L. Andrews. Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall, 1991. 94-107.

self goes unexpressed or never fully imagined: "The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. It is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery" (104). Baker's analysis concludes that in choosing to represent himself in the oppressor's language, Douglass also chooses the values, codes, and conventions embodied within that white, Western, Christian language: "It would not be an overstatement to say that the liberated self portrayed by Douglass is firmly Christian, having adopted cherished values from the white world that held him in bondage" (101).

Baker's argument should not be mistaken as a collapse into purely essentialist categories of identity. For Baker, the question is not simply one of whether Douglass was "black enough," but an attempt to tease out the peculiar representational difficulties of black autobiographers writing in English in the absence of a black literary tradition. Authenticity and identity are the primary concepts under scrutiny when Baker asks: "Where . . . in Douglass's *Narrative* does a prototypical black American self reside? What are the distinctive narrative elements that combine to form a representation of this self?" (104). The questions Baker asks are fruitful places to begin to locate black identity in the pages of Douglass's text. Baker suggests that we look to passages in the *Narrative* that deal with Douglass's acquisition of literacy if we want to answer questions about how Douglass, as author, constructs a self within the autobiographical framework of a slave narrative.

My own investigation of the literacy passages in the *Narrative* will focus less on Douglass's creation of a black self as narrator and more on the possibilities that lie within the *Narrative* to *read* a more fully authentic, black self. I will consider how Douglass depicts

reading and readers within his text. What opportunities, if any, does Douglass's *Narrative* offer for imagining an authentic black reading self, particularly given the circumstances of its publication and reception within the predominately white abolitionist movement? What would distinguish the black reading self from a writing or speaking one? What concept(s) of reading or black reading, in particular, operate here? What are the strategies of black reading? What are the political outcomes of depicting a black reading subject within a black text produced for a mostly white audience?

Taking the Ell

When Mrs. Auld teaches Douglass the alphabet and the rudiments of reading, she sets him on a course that "'forever unfit[s] him to be a slave'" (48). Once Douglass becomes aware of Hugh Auld's strong opposition to his literacy, he "set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" (48). For blacks, both freed and slave, literacy was rare, but sought after. Douglass mentions in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that his own mother was literate, but he does not know how she came by this knowledge. Douglass himself enjoys a kind of distinction among the slaves because he can read and write. He also attempts to teach other slaves to read in his Sabbath school. But slave literacy was illegal.[156] Punishments for slave literacy included whippings, loss of fingers, branding, sale, or segregation. Because it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write, an "unpardonable offense" Douglass explains, he finds ways to "trick" local white boys into teaching him his letters (51). He asserts that the day

[156] See Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P,2006); Antonio Bly, "'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730-1776," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (2008) 261-94.

he discovered literacy as the "pathway from slavery to freedom" was the day he realized "the white man's power to enslave the black man" (Douglass 48). As the exclusive privilege of whites, literacy served as a marker of racial difference and cultural exclusion by the 1830s, for, as Douglass mentions in describing the "hungry little urchins" he "converted into teachers" for the price of bread, among whites, literacy was no longer limited to the middle and upper classes (51; 50). The democratizing impulse of the Jacksonian era spread functional literacy to include most native-born, white American males and in many places women and girls were literate as well. In 1850, the literacy rate among white, adult Americans was 90 percent (Zboray 83), but among free blacks only about 50 percent (Nelson 149). (White) Americans considered themselves a "nation of readers." (Zboray 36).

It is precisely the mutual development of literacy and nationalism, signaled in the phrase "nation of readers" that Ronald Zboray clarifies in *A Fictive People*.[157] Zboray argues that in the complex upheaval of industrialism, Americans turned to fiction to provide a stabilizing influence and, in doing so, "the printed word became the primary avenue of national enculturation" (xvi). Unlike the spoken word, which requires locality to communicate, the printed word had the ability to travel the long distances of the growing nation and engage disparately situated readers in a shared text. Zboray contends that this mobility of print invested readers with a sort of "dual citizenship," both in the local and the "fictive," larger community: "[Fictional] texts were not merely reflecting Americanness; they were attempting to create it. Readers looked to these works to 'discover' themselves by imbibing new norms to which they might conform, or at least new ways they might interpret their lives" (82; 192). If literacy functioned as a primary means

[157] Zboray, Ronald J. *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

of producing an "American" self, then African-Americans, slave or free, denied literacy were denied the ability to access and forge larger, non-local communities.

The restriction of literacy seems particularly damaging to slaves because of the great cultural significance education had come to hold in antebellum America. Promoted as the key to moral, political, and economic freedom, literacy was central to full citizenship, to full Americanness. Even among slaves in the deep South, the value placed on literacy was felt.[158] Harvey Graff suggests that this value was mostly symbolic, but potent: "[The] literate slave gained status and importance in the quarters. A source of news and information, forger of passes, and reader of Scriptures, such a person stood as a symbol of black educability and achievement and a symbol of defiance. The benefits of literacy were more than material, more than narrowly functional. Regardless of the threat that it represented to the slave system, it had powerful meaning to the slaves themselves" (Graff 362).[159] When Hugh Auld scolds his wife for teaching Douglass the alphabet, Douglass resolves to acquire this knowledge at all costs because he now understands its importance: "The very decided manner in which [Auld] spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. . . . the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn" (48).

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[158] For a discussion of the meaning of literacy among slaves, see Sidbury, James. "Reading, Revelation, and Rebellion: The Textual Communities of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner." *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 119-133. For information about African-American reading communities, see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002); and, Anna Mae Duane, "'Like a Motherless Child:' Racial Education at the New York African Free School and in *My Bondage and My Freedom American Literature* 82.3 (Sept. 2010): 461-88.

[159] Graff, Harvey. *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1987.

We must guard against the easy equation of literacy and freedom, despite its appearance as a major trope in African-American texts. Grey Gundaker argues that even in a print culture that prized literacy, African-Americans were well aware of "the duplicitous potentials of reading and writing" and found ways to avoid or reshape "treacherous print" through "specific local conditions and concerted efforts to unite for political action" (484).[160] Dana Nelson argues that literacy itself is not the "pathway to freedom," but that the ideology of literacy may simply *conceal* equally powerful exclusionary cultural tactics. In *Literacy in Theory and Practice,* Brian Street explains that literacy "is more than just the 'technology' in which it is manifest. . . . It is a social process, in which particular socially constructed technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes" (qtd. in Nelson 142).[161] In antebellum America, those social purposes often included discriminatory practices against African-Americans overwhelming any advantage derived from literacy. Nonetheless, slaves, like Douglass, seized literacy without the aid or consent of their masters and used their newfound skills to seek freedom for themselves and others. Yet even after the Civil War, the expectations of literacy often went unfulfilled (Graff 363). Despite the disheartening realities of racial and class prejudice that would continue to hamper the freedoms and economic viability of African-Americans, the trope of literacy as the "pathway to freedom" became an enduring piece of the African-American literary legacy, with Douglass's *Narrative* at the forefront of this tradition.

As important as the theme of literacy was to slaves themselves, Ann Kibbey and Michele Stepto argue that Douglass's struggle for literacy is wrested from, what they call the

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[160] Grey Gundaker, "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice" *A History of the Book in America. An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*. Eds. Robert Gross and Mary Kelley. Vol. 2. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010). 483-95.

[161] Dana Nelson, "The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America." *Reading in America*. Ed. Cathy N. Davidson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 140-156.

"antilanguage of slavery."[162] The "antilanguage of slavery," Kibbey and Stepto write persuasively, is a discourse that denies the humanity of slaves and "systematically destroys the meaning of words to preserve at any cost the meaning of the one word, 'slave'" (167). Kibbey and Stepto posit that because slavery refutes the subjectivity of the slave, the slaveholder is also held in an odd relationship to language. Unwilling to give commands to a person-slave, a "you," the slaveholder necessarily loses status as a speaking "I." Instead, the slaveholder relies on the "nonverbal 'utterance' of the whip" to command a chattel-slave (Kibbey and Stepto 166). But this "antilanguage" is fractured: "The slaveholder acts as if his utterances were *performative*, but they are in fact only *imperative*, and always contain the possibility for disobedience. . . .For in the gap that exists between material reality and language—a gap bridged, yet thereby also maintained, in the master's whip—there exists the certainty that slavery's antilanguage is not fully definitive, either of material reality or of the slave's subjectivity buried within it" (Kibbey and Stepto 180; italics in original). Kibbey and Stepto maintain that Douglass uncovers "his own suppressed literal humanity" in the fight with Covey, a physical act to match the purely physical body slavery would reduce him to. The fight reveals the slaveholder's fundamental inability to command the slave outside of, or even inside of, language.

While Kibbey and Stepto keenly point out the fractured discourse of slavery and its obfuscation of the slave's subjectivity, they miss the point by insisting on the fight with Covey as Douglass's determining moment. I would argue strenuously that Douglass's awareness of his own subjectivity occurs primarily because of reading. It is through reading that Douglass possesses a sense of himself; through reading that Douglass revises the texts of his and others' making; it is through reading that Douglass chooses action. As we shall see, reading becomes

[162] Kibbey, Ann and Michele Stepto. "The Antilanguage of Slavery: Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991. 166-191.

Douglass's entry point into language and subjectivity long before the fight with Covey. But even if we disregard chronology and focus on the *Narrative* more as a linguistic recreation of Douglass's claim of subjectivity, and less as an autobiographical account, reading itself becomes the primary means through which Douglass "writes" the world: "reading . . . allowed me to utter my thoughts" (51). As Kibbey and Stepto suggest, Douglass, at times, feels that "learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing" (52) because it brought him insight into his situation without the solution, but, I will argue, that it is precisely the unique mode of reading Douglass develops and practices throughout the *Narrative* that offers him both the insight and the solution to his situation. In a similar passage, Kibbey and Stepto maintain, Douglass speaks about the anguish he experiences once he knows the concept of freedom: "[Freedom] was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm" (52). Kibbey and Stepto assert: "In this pathetic fallacy, Douglass has no voice of his own, for his commitment to freedom has alienated him from his material and social existence. The world figuratively 'speaks' his freedom only because, as a slave, he cannot literally speak it for himself" (169). By focusing on the speaking, or unspoken voice, Kibbey and Stepto miss the depiction of reading Douglass offers us. Douglass may not "speak" his freedom, but he surely "reads" it in every text that he meets. By reading his freedom, Douglass is able to assume subjectivity. As a reading subject, Douglass ultimately, seizes his freedom.

Claiming as I do, the importance of reading to Douglass's sense of himself, it is critical that we look closely at the passages that deal with Douglass's acquisition of literacy. Though

Douglass does not use true dialogue in his *Narrative*, the exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Auld regarding the reading lessons Sophia Auld had been giving Douglass, contains a similar sense of immediacy that suggests conversation between the two. Douglass makes a point of quoting, rather than paraphrasing what Auld says: "To use his own words . . . he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world'" (48; italics in original). In this instance, Douglass includes Auld's "own words" within his text, not to give them primacy, but as we shall see, to make them resignify. Eavesdropping on the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Auld opens up to the boy Douglass "a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things" (Douglass 48). Pre-literate, he is already "reading," interpreting the behaviors and discourse surrounding him. In this case, Douglass's sharp analytical skills reveal to him the importance of literacy and the high degree of value the white "masters" place upon it. Douglass demonstrates a keen awareness that he and Auld have opposing interests, not just on this occasion, but many. He states: "What [Auld] most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn" (Douglass 48). This determination is demonstrated, in the immediate sense, through Douglass's unflagging effort to gain the information needed to read.

In the text of the *Narrative*, Douglass's resolve finds expression by repeating, but playing upon, Auld's "own words": "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch,* and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*" (50; italics in original). By making Auld's words resignify, Douglass overturns the self-limiting characterization of him that Auld espouses

and replaces it with a firmness and intellect not to be hampered. Douglass accurately reads the text of Auld's conversation, fully realizing Auld's opposition to slaves reading, but then he reads Auld's text "against the grain." That is, Douglass rejects the message of Auld's text, turns it around, and within his own *Narrative*, finds ways to give Auld's words different meaning. This resignification is one of the first of many resignifications in the *Narrative* and the body of Douglass's work.

In fact, this strategy of reading and revising becomes Douglass's signature style of writing. Douglass's acts of writing are tied inextricably with acts of reading and revising. Whether prompted by Garrison and other abolitionists' limited readings of his *Narrative* and of the slave body, or white Northerners' misreadings of slave songs, or his own reflective readings of his autobiography(ies), Douglass's resignifications of white readings of humanness and the black body are generated by reading. For Douglass, re-reading and subsequent writing, become a transforming and transformative appropriation of a discourse of exclusion and difference. Douglass performs radical acts of redefinition when he signifies upon his "master's" name: "I began to want to live *upon free land* as well as with *Freeland*" (74). The ultimate sign of oppression, the name of his master, becomes for Douglass, the impetus for escape: "I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder" (74).

Many of the passages in the *Narrative* that deal with Douglass's resignifications, particularly resignifications of white "texts," involve the concept of "signifying" explored by Henry Louis Gates.[163] Though Gates emphasizes the difficulty of defining "signifying" precisely, the rhetorical technique has to do with the use of irony, parody, puns, plays on words, or making a portion of a text speak against itself. Though Douglass's texts studiously avoid the

[163] See Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

black vernacular, a component of many of the African-American texts Gates analyzes as examples of signifying, the *Narrative*, nonetheless, contains several examples of plays on words, puns, or other literary strategies that could qualify as signifying.

For example, in another play on words, Douglass resignifies Covey's comments after their momentous fight. Douglass concludes the narration of his fight with Covey by turning Covey's statement on itself: "Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all" (Douglass 68). Emphasizing the emptiness of Covey's words, "puffing and blowing," amounting to nothing meaningful, Douglass plays on Covey's "whipped." In Covey's usage "whipped" refers to the fight itself, the beating he'd like Douglass to believe he received, but Douglass turns the phrase to refer to the literal "whipping" he did not receive. Whipping was the punishment Covey intended for Douglass, the official punishment for striking a white man, and, most significantly, an image that by the 1840s had come to represent slavery itself.[164] Douglass's first exposure to whipping serves as the moment of initiation into slavery, his first exposure to slavery's brutality (34). In abolitionist tracts, the symbol of the lash spoke volumes about the evil physical, emotional, and spiritual dominance of the white man over the black. When Douglass writes of Covey's failure to dominate him physically with the lash, he suggests Covey's failure to dominate him in other ways as well. Douglass refers to the "battle" with Covey as the "turning-point in my career as a slave. . . [It] revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (69). He repeats the scene almost word-for-word in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, though he places the phrase "he had not whipped me at all" in italics for emphasis. By signifying upon Covey's words, Douglass is able to wrap up the fight scene with a linguistic win

that foreshadows the literal win he will earn when he escapes to New York. Though in reality a slave at this point and only sixteen years old, on a rhetorical level, Douglass begins to mobilize the language of manhood to highlight his success in the altercation with Covey and suggest a black manhood that is the equal of, or, in this case, the superior to, white manhood.

Additionally, Douglass includes examples that tell of a broader, oral culture of signifying exhibited by the slaves he knew. For instance, Douglass speaks of the songs slaves sang as they went to the Great House Farm:

> [The slaves] would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;--and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. . . they would sing . . . to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. (37-38)

These songs demonstrate the gap between the literal and figurative meanings of the words, or between the sentiment of the lyrics and the sound quality of the tune. In this way, the slave songs make evident the "double-voiced" discourse Gates attributes to African-American texts and calls the trope of the Talking Book, a way of "making the white written text speak with a black voice" (131). By using the white, Christian vocabulary of English to express the "complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish" (Douglass 38), slaves, in the moment of song, remade the very language of English to speak a black and mournful text.

Douglass offers white readers the clues they need to "read" slave songs more accurately. He explains: "I have been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who

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[164] See Brodhead, Richard. *Culture of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993, for a discussion of corporal punishment and the lash as a "figure of thought" in antebellum America (13).

could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake" (38). Douglass goes on to clarify for white readers the reasons why slaves sing, to relieve "an aching heart" (38). But because white people have relied on the literal content of the lyrics of songs, or because they have interpreted the songs based on the faulty supposition that singing indicates happiness, many whites have misunderstood the slave songs. In setting them straight, Douglass suggests an embodied notion of reading that is at odds with the cerebral image of literacy that dominates Western culture. Douglass says: "If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,--and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in his obdurate heart'[165] (38). Insisting that the songs be heard in person and in silence, Douglass insists on an embodied concept of reading that requires bodily experience to "take in" the message of the song. Though Douglass speaks of the "soul" of the reader, he concludes this exhortation with a double image of the body, the "flesh" of the "heart."

As Douglass's slave songs passage has been thoughtfully analyzed by previous scholars, let me simply underscore my main point here. For Douglass, accurate reading of the black text requires bodily experience. One must allow the sounds of the slave song to move through one's own body in order to appropriately "read" them. In this segment, and in the following passage: "The hearing of these wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them" (38), Douglass connects reading to the body in much the same way he connects writing to the body in the oft-quoted pen

[165] Douglass alludes to William Cowper's anti-slavery poem, "The Task" (1785): "There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart, / It does not feel for man; the natural bond / Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax / That falls asunder

in the cracks of the foot paragraph.[166] Reading the text of slave songs provokes a physical response for Douglass. The body is altered, changed in some small way by the experience of reading. Douglass's tears not only signify his sympathy with and sorrow for the plight of his fellow slaves, but also suggest the underlying premise of the *Narrative*: successful reading requires a subsequent, embodied doing. That is, the *Narrative* prompts political action to abolish slavery. Just as Douglass's reading of the white sails of the ships in the Chesapeake Bay, "robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition," urged him to make plans for escape, the successful reader of the *Narrative* must take Douglass's message into his body and do something with it (64). To accurately read Douglass's text, the *Narrative* demands the reader to oppose slavery and work for its end. To do less is to misread the *Narrative*, in the same way many Northerners misread the slave songs. Thus, the *Narrative* suggests a model of reading that results in concrete action and in its action-orientation, is closely tied to concepts of masculinity.

Arguing, then, for a powerful model of reading, as reading resulting in action, the concept of reading suggested by Douglass's three autobiographies draws from notions of masculinity as an active, driving force. In the *Narrative*, shortly after Douglass signifies upon Freeland's name, he explains the rationale for his first escape attempt: "I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something" (74). Douglass creates a textual chain of events that goes something like this: read, revise, act. The pattern repeats again and again throughout the *Narrative.* First, Douglass "reads" a text, then he revises it, usually in a linguistic sense, and ultimately he takes action based on that revision. In this formulation, we see Douglass himself as a "reader" of sorts, if we define the

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at the touch of fire."

term "text" in its broadest sense, including the texts of human behavior, culture, and social and political events. In another formulation, we can trace out the strategies of reading the three autobiographies advocate for an unspecified, but carefully crafted "reader" suggested by the texts. In either case, what we see in the autobiographies is a vision of the reader—whether conceived of as Douglass himself or Douglass's version of an implied reader—who reads a text, revises it in some self-ratifying way, and is compelled toward concrete action. The reader's action not only partakes of cultural images of masculinity, and "manhood," in particular, but is itself defining of the manhood he possesses. The reader, for Douglass, must be, not only male, but a man.

Returning to the Freeland excerpt by way of explanation, we can see that Douglass first "reads" the circumstance of his continued enslavement by a man named Freeland. He revises the text by signifying upon Freeland's name and making the name stand for freedom, rather than oppression. Douglass feels compelled toward action. He must escape. The excerpt demonstrates the pattern of read, revise, act that marks Douglass's autobiographies, but it also reveals the essential connection between this pattern or strategy of reading and an active notion of manhood. The embodied reading Douglass advocates, "let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation . . . place himself in the deep pine woods" is reading in a specifically male body. The masculine pronoun used here is not only used by nineteenth century convention. Instead, the autobiographies contend that to be a successful reader, one must be a *man.*

[166] Douglass draws strong connections between writing and the body in this passage: "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes" (*Narrative* 45).

How the reader was made a man

The questions that trouble an analysis of the role of reading in Douglass's autobiographies are questions of authorial control, questions of the linguistic stability of signifiers like "slave," "master," and "man," and questions about the function of the vexed, racialized body itself. To keep each of these issues in mind as we delve into the role of the reader and reading is both complicated and necessary if we are to uncover the way Douglass uses reading to strategize the slave's seizure of subjectivity and full participation in the linguistic/textual economy. For Douglass, reading is always based in a notion of difference, reliant on schisms between self/other, masculine/feminine, author/text, black/white, but these primary divisions do allow Douglass to conceive of a black reading subject, a concept (and reality) outlawed in Douglass's time and place.

Feminist critics[167] of the *Narrative*, reading with an eye toward Douglass's treatment of women in the text, point out that "slave" becomes synonymous with "male." Though Douglass mentions multiple instances of cruelty toward women slaves and even suggests the added burden of sexual exploitation that female slaves suffered, Deborah McDowell claims that these scenes slip into the voyeuristic and the, at least partial, identification with the slaveholder, and hence, his pleasure and power: "Douglass's repetition of the sexualized scene of whipping projects him into a voyeuristic relation to the violence against slave women, which he watches, and thus he

[167] See Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* New York: Norton, 1985 and bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End P, 1984, for critiques of the critical treatment of slave history, particularly scholars' emphasis on refuting the "Sambo thesis" at the cost of consideration of the lives and perspectives of female slaves. See Mary Helen Washington, Valerie Smith, David Leverenz, Deborah McDowell, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Frances Foster, and Jenny Franchot among others for analyses of Douglass's treatment of women.

enters into a symbolic complicity with the sexual crime he witnesses" (203).[168] Karen Sánchez-Eppler points out that Douglass often writes of freedom from a strictly male perspective. When, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass decries the fact that slaves are forbidden from taking legal wives and maintaining families, he does so from a strictly male point of view. Sánchez-Eppler explains that from this perspective, women slaves become "the sign and condition of another's freedom. The freedom so defined . . . is available to neither child nor woman" (48).[169] When Douglass speaks of his own wife, Anna Murray, he does so with the minimum of detail. Though Murray, a free black woman, was instrumental in Douglass's escape from slavery, she receives little attention in the autobiographies, a fact that David Leverenz sees as evidence of Douglass's focus on manhood: "Douglass's whole sense of latter-day self, in both the *Narrative* and its revision, focuses on manhood; his wife seems an afterthought. He introduces her to his readers as a rather startling appendage to his escape and marries her almost in the same breath" (128).[170] Each of these commentators is accurate in noting Douglass's male bias; he is not merely extrapolating from personal experience when he sees the slave as male. Rather, Douglass focuses on manhood because it is through the concept of manhood that he is able to produce a practice of reading that allows him to recognize and harness his own subjectivity. In the *Narrative*, Douglass writes: "I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he

[168] McDowell, Deborah E. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall, 192-214.

[169] Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988). 28-59.

ceases to be a man" (83). The passage highlights the intellectual isolation that slavery entails, the complete divorce of the self from the relational world of human activity. Yet, through reading, Douglass finds a way of resisting the darkening of his vision. The method of reading Douglass practices—read, revise, act—is at the heart of the vision of manhood he espouses. Thus, when Douglass says: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man," he speaks directly to the reader, offering the statement in a kind of performance of masculine reading (65). The initial part of this much celebrated chiasmus contains Douglass's reading of his first six months at Covey's farm, for it was in this time that he felt "broken in body, soul, and spirit" (64). The final half of the statement contains Douglass's revision, turning the language of the first half into a promise of action. Lest the dramatic nature of the performance be missed by the inattentive reader, Douglass carefully sets up the declaration by informing us that the events which follow "form an epoch in [his] humble history" (65). Yet, at this moment, there is no humility to be found. Using the hyberbolic "epoch" to describe a six months timeframe, here Douglass acts as storyteller extraordinaire, carefully controlling the pace, rhythm, and mood of his account.

The altercation with Covey forms the most memorable and dramatic episode of the *Narrative* for, in the textual recreation of this experience, Douglass says it "revived within me a sense of my own manhood," but through it, he also betters the "white man" in the contest for his own representation (69). As I mentioned earlier, within the autobiographies, Douglass's win over Covey, the fact that he is not whipped after all, suggests a kind of triumph over slavery itself and the all-controlling power of the white man. Though Douglass remains a slave "in form" after the confrontation with Covey, he was no longer a "slave in fact" (69). That is,

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[170] Leverenz, David. "Douglass's Self-Fashioning." *Manhood and the American Renaissance.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.

Douglass "did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me" (69). Tying together and overlapping the notions of manhood, freedom, and linguistic play, Douglass accomplishes not only a physical victory over Covey, but the ability to create the terms of the episode's recreation. Douglass assumes authorial control of the narration of the event and his own representation. Moreover, because Douglass revised his *Narrative* and later revised *My Bondage and My Freedom* with *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), itself expanded and revised in 1892, he becomes, quite literally, his own ideal reader. Douglass's reading of the *Narrative*, is inscribed in *Bondage and Freedom;* his reading of *Bondage and Freedom* forms the text of *The Life* (1881) and later, the expanded 1892 edition. Each of these inscriptions and subsequent revisions place Douglass in the joint position of both author and reader. In this way, Douglass produces an image or representation of himself that is both powerful and persuasive. As Douglass himself would attest, he is, in more ways than one, a "self-made man."[171]

The battle for representation that the Covey fight enacts, is played out similarly with the authenticating documents published and bound with the *Narrative*. In *From Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto contends that the letters by William Garrison and Wendell Phillips, create a "war" with Douglass's text for authorial control of the *Narrative*. This war, Stepto suggests, is not one of author against progenitor, as in Harold Bloom's oedipal thesis, but for African-American writers, the battle is "more of a race ritual than one of patricide," between "artist and authenticator (editor, publisher, guarantor, patron)" (45).[172] Stepto concludes that Douglass's text succeeds in establishing its own authentication; Douglass retains authorial control.

[171] Douglass gave an inspirational speech titled "Self-Made Men" throughout his life, from 1859 on. For an analysis of the speech, see Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982.

[172] Stepto, Robert. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979.

It is interesting to note the language of warfare Stepto uses to describe the conflict of voices within the opening pages of the *Narrative*. Here, it seems, the vocabulary of physical altercation with which Douglass describes the fight with Covey, spills into Stepto's analysis of the strictly literary struggles between Douglass and prominent white voices. This, no doubt unconscious, critical stance reflects the masculinist bias of Douglass's own writing, reinforcing "manhood" not only as a prominent theme in the autobiographies, but also as a prominent perspective through which Douglass himself is viewed and evaluated.

Deborah McDowell is alert to precisely this kind of bias in contemporary scholarship on Douglass. By approaching the authenticating documents as a battle, a competition among male texts and authors, we may miss the more fundamental issues at stake in the relationships between these texts. McDowell points to a passage from *Bondage and Freedom* in which Douglass describes himself learning to write in the blank spaces of a discarded copybook: "When my mistress left me in charge of the house, I had a grand time; I got Master Tommy's copy books and pen and ink, and, in the ample spaces between the lines, I wrote other lines, as nearly like his as possible" (235).[173] For McDowell, this passage is significant in that it highlights exactly the dynamics at work here between the various male texts. She states perceptively:

> This hand-to-hand combat between black and white men for physical, then narrative, control over bodies and texts raises the question of who is on whose side? For, in its allegiance to the dialectics of dominance and subordination, Douglass's *Narrative* is, and not surprisingly so, a by-product of Master Tommy's copybook, especially in its gendered division of power relations. The representation of women being whipped, in form and function, is only one major instance of this point but the representation of women, in general, shows Master Tommy's imprint. (206)

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[173] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. 1855. *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1996). 103-452.

By adopting the competitive, white, male model and its unequal power relations, Douglass also adopts an unequal power structure between men and women.

We can see evidence of the *Narrative's* participation in gender hierarchies and roles in Douglass's depictions of Sophia Auld. In a passage which examines the brutalizing effects of slavery on both the slaveholder and the slave, Douglass describes Sophia Auld's transformation from "a kind and tenderhearted woman" to a "demon" (50; 48):

> Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tenderhearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition became one of tiger-like fierceness. (50)

Here, Sophia Auld is presented, initially, according to the gendered expectations of antebellum women that Barbara Welter terms, the "cult of true womanhood."[174] Emphasizing piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, Douglass's early depiction of Sophia Auld conforms to gendered expectations of her, but slavery disrupts this culturally acceptable depiction. "Fierceness" and later, "fury" are the crimes of which Douglass accuses her. Cruelty seems less an issue than forcefulness. He indicates that "the first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me" (50), but fails to acknowledge that, as a woman, Sophia Auld is also the social and cultural inferior of her husband, the white "master." When she "commenced to practice her husband's precepts . . . She was not satisfied with doing as well as he commanded; she seemed anxious to do better" (Douglass 50). Douglass passes these statements over leaving them unexplored. He does not acknowledge that the selfsame power structure which holds him

[174] See Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1976. 21-41.

in literal bondage produces a kind of figurative bondage for her as well, nor does he examine the reasons for her anxiety to exceed her husband's expectations and fulfill his "command."

The question then becomes, how is Master Tommy's "imprint" felt in the notion of reading produced by Douglass?[175] How does this white power hierarchy play out on the page? For Douglass, it seems largely to confine the autobiographies to a notion of reading based in difference, whether racial, sexual, or textual. Douglass's model of reading—read, revise, act—produces a black reading subject, but that subject is conceived as male. Douglass's concept of manhood informs his notion of reading so fundamentally, that the two cannot be divorced. Retaining and resignifying the black, male body became a primary theme for Douglass and key to his concept of reading and of authorial control.

At an August 1841 anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Douglass spoke publicly about his experiences as a slave for one of the first times. It was a transformative moment for him. He says in the *Narrative*: " . . . the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease" (92-93). Speaking his story offers Douglass a "degree of freedom," linking the speaking voice/text with freedom of expression, at the least. Douglass gives a fuller account of the incident in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Here, he tells of how Garrison spoke after him: "Mr. Garrison followed me, *taking me as his text*" (212; emphasis added). The phraseology of this observation suggests a sense of the deeper dynamic at work in the relationships between Douglass and the abolitionist movement and provides a neat handle for the analysis of the way

[175] For a discussion of Douglass's use of language and formation of identity from a psychological perspective, see Kimberly Drake. "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs." *MELUS* 22.4 (1997): 91-108. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 27 Oct. 2009.

Douglass himself, and particularly his racialized body, become texts to be read by white audiences, readers, and abolitionists.

Douglass explains that even among the abolitionists, race prejudice was rampant. White, abolitionist readings of his black body were often fearful, if not downright hostile: "When it was said to me, 'Mr. Douglass, I will walk to meeting with you; I am not afraid of a black man,' I could not help thinking—seeing nothing very frightful in my appearance—'And why should you be?' The children at the north had all been educated to believe that if they were bad, the old *black* man—not the old *devil*—would get them" (218; *Bondage and Freedom*; italics in original).[176] Douglass does not here examine the conflagration between black man and devil, but clearly, the slippage becomes yet another of the troubling aspects of Christianity's relation to slavery in the text. Douglass's prime motive for including the account is to underscore the amount of prejudice that existed at the north—Douglass couldn't find work in the skilled trades, but had to work as an unskilled laborer, he was "escorted" off trains because of his skin color, served separately from whites at restaurants and hotels, etc.—even among those who were working to end slavery.

Despite the financial and physical hardships no doubt caused by white racial prejudice, what seems to have been most difficult for Douglass were the abolitionist attempts to control his self-presentation, speeches, and ultimately, texts. Douglass recounts the pressure placed on him to adhere to a narrow role, that of the plantation slave speaking a simple account of his life in slavery. But Douglass had other ideas: "I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like

[176] Each of the references to Douglass's writing from here to the end of the chapter are from Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom. The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Oxford UP. 164-222.

denouncing them. . . . Besides I was growing, and needed room" (214; italics in original). Within Garrison, John Collins, and George Foster's encouragement to tell "your story" and "be yourself," we see a determined attempt to direct Douglass's presentation and text. Garrison frames Douglass's speeches by whispering to him before he steps up to the platform, "'Tell your story, Frederick'" (213). Collins advises: "'Be yourself . . . and tell your story.' It was said to me, 'Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned'" (214). Foster "always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. 'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy'" (213). Even among the abolitionists, Douglass is expected to confine his self-presentation to a plantation stereotype recognizable to antebellum audiences.[177] In the abolitionist "handling" of Douglass, we can see an attempt to appropriate the speaking black body of a former slave for, albeit, joint purpose—the abolition of slavery—but Douglass resists the usurpation of his text, declaring: "These excellent friends were actuated by the best of motives, and were not altogether wrong in their advice; and still I must speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word to be spoken *by* me" (214; italics in original). Twice, Douglass emphasizes his selfhood in the foregoing formulation; he knows himself to be the "me" at issue. Moreover, Douglass defies abolitionist opposition as he writes and publishes his own anti-slavery journal, *The North Star*.

When Douglass breaks with Garrison over the question of whether to advocate the dissolution of the union, he has come fully into his own view.[178] Most importantly, he recounts

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[177] See Sterling Brown's, now classic, 1933 "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" for an analysis of seven, prevalent literary types used to depict African-Americans in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature by white writers. Brown underscores that "generalizations about *the* Negro character remain a far better analysis of a white man than of *the* Negro" (179). Brown, Sterling. "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors." *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (1933) : 179-203.

[178] For more information about the differences of opinion between Douglass and Garrison (and black and white abolitionists), see: James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 237-68.; Leon F. Litwack. *North of*

the blossoming of his own interpretation or reading of the Constitution. He explains why he initially accepted Garrison's view and why he later rejects it:

> Brought directly, when I escaped from slavery, into contact with a class of abolitionists regarding the constitution as a slaveholding instrument . . . it is not strange that I assumed the constitution to be just what their interpretation made it. . . .
>
> My new circumstances compelled me to re-think the whole subject . . . By such a course of thought and reading, I was conducted to the conclusion that the constitution of the United States . . . could not well have been designed at the same time to maintain and perpetuate a system of rapine and murder like slavery . . . (217-218)

Douglass has put aside the reading conventions of the Garrisonians and formed his own reading of the best political strategy to end slavery. Again, we see Douglass acting out his preferred pattern of reading. First, he reads (and thinks). Next, he revises. And, finally, Douglass acts. Here, he discards Garrison's reading of the Constitution in favor of his own. What we see, particularly in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, is Douglass's development as a political speaker and activist in his own right.

To a large extent, Douglass's self-presentation as a leader owes much to the notion of reading laid out in the autobiographies, a notion clearly aligned with his concept of manhood. This model of reading, in its insistence on "manly" action and masculine embodiment, incorporates a binary knowledge system, familiar to Douglass in the white, Western, patriarchal social and cultural milieu of antebellum America. That his self-fashioning, and more relevantly here, his fashioning of a black reading subject, does not challenge many of the assumptions at the core of this knowledge system is not what interests me about the idea of reading Douglass

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Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961. 214-46.; and, Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease. *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830–1861*. New York: Atheneum, 1974.

produced. What is remarkable is the extent to which Douglass was able to harness the dichotomies which surrounded him and use them to depict a black, literate manhood, outlawed in his own day, yet compelling enough to continue to influence American literature in our own.

Delicate Ears, Tenderhearted Tears, and the Authority of Experience: (Un)Knowing in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Douglass's autobiographies depict literacy as a conduit to freedom and subjectivity. In a failed escape attempt, Douglass consumes the forged pass, literally ingesting the written word. But for Harriet Jacobs, literacy functions less straightforwardly. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) suggests no easy equation of literacy and freedom. Unlike Douglass who wrested the knowledge to read and write against his master's prohibition, Jacobs is taught to read by her first mistress, gaining knowledge of the written word from the very woman who holds her in bondage. Literacy does not bring freedom, but complicates slavery. In fact, literacy itself becomes an especial form of persecution for Jacobs as her master uses her ability to read and write against her.

Ultimately, Jacobs will wield her literacy as a strategy to secure her own freedom through false letters mailed from the North that trick her master into believing she has already escaped his grasp, though she remains hidden in the attic above her grandmother's shed for close to seven years. Later, she will agitate for abolition by writing for anti-slavery newspapers, and in 1861, she will publish her boldest proclamation against slave exploitation, a narrative of her life in slavery, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Incidents* is not only a remarkable account of a woman's slave experience from an historical perspective, but it merits both popular and critical attention for its focus on the rampant sexual abuse of slave women and the culture in which this

abuse flourishes. Moreover, *Incidents* takes an unflinching look at Northern complacency and complicity in slavery.

In its journey from critical obscurity to prominence, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* has been examined from many perspectives, but the question of genre is, perhaps, the most extensively discussed. Because the text shares so many features and narrative techniques with the sentimental novel, it was for years dismissed, overlooked, or rejected outright from analysis as a slave narrative.[179] Verisimilitude has long been considered to be integral to the political project of slave narratives because only by establishing the factuality of their accounts of slavery could their authors convince the reading public that slavery ought to be abolished.[180] Therefore, a slave narrative which draws techniques from the sentimental novel raises questions not only about narrative style or form, but also about its political objective(s). Yet, Jacobs, herself, seems to address this issue in the preface when she writes as Linda Brent: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" (1).[181] Acknowledging the "incredible" events in her account and apologizing for her execution of the narrative, Jacobs calls directly on her women readers when she states: "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (1). In this call for solidarity, Jacobs seems to use the sentimental mode specifically to connect with female readers.

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[179] Jean Fagan Yellin's 1981 work to corroborate the historical accuracy of Jacob's account of her life in slavery in Edenton, North Carolina established the authenticity of the narrative. See Yellin, Jean Fagan. "Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative." *American Literature* 53 (1981): 479-486. and Yellin, Jean Fagan. "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*" *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

[180] Barbara Foley's "The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature." *PMLA* 95.3 (1980): 389-403, places the generic expectation of verisimilitude for slave narratives in context with demands for veracity or authentication in other "black literature," by African-American authors or literature dealing with the African-American experience.

[181] All quotes from Jacobs are from Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987.

Sally Mitchell's "Sentiment and Suffering" offers a context for the reception of sentimental fiction by women readers of the 1850s, '60s, and '70s.[182] Though Jacobs's slave narrative is more complicated (and complicating) than the "highly emotional," light reading of the mid-century woman's novel, the emotional identification of the "woman reader" with the characters in these plots, can be instructive with regard to *Incidents*. Like the sentimental novel, Jacobs's narrative seeks to connect with the reader primarily through emotion, forming a common space of deep, though typically, unvoiced, shared emotion. Mitchell points out that the sentimental novel "gratifies common needs; . . . gives repressed emotions a form that is publicly acceptable . . . It also affords recognition that these needs are common—shared between author and reader, and reader and reader" (34). Writing across lines of race and class as she was, the value of this shared emotional space between Jacobs and her reader cannot be underestimated. For, unlike the women's novels Mitchell analyzes, Jacobs uses this emotional connection as the platform from which to launch her social and political critique.[183] Carolyn Karcher has rightly argued that Jacobs politicizes the domestic novel.[184] Hazel Carby and Mary Helen Washington assert that Jacobs's work reflects her involvement in political feminism and her narrative advocates political action for women.[185] Jean Fagan Yellin stresses the alliances between women

[182] See Mitchell, Sally. "Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860s." *Victorian Studies* 21 (1977): 29-45. Though the plots of sentimental fiction can be viewed correctly as "the daydreams of the common reader," Mitchell goes on to argue that they constitute an emotional, not intellectual critique of their culture. Jacobs makes use of this aspect of the sentimental fiction, yet adds to it a scathing political commentary, as well.

[183] As Jean Fagan Yellin describes, the narrative received a lackluster reception at the time of its 1861 publication. "[P]erhaps," Yellin explains "as the nation moved toward civil war, yet another slave narrative seemed of minor importance" (xxiv). See Yellin, Jean Fagan. Introduction. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. By Harriet Jacobs. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. xiii-xxxiv.

[184] See Carolyn Karcher, "Rape, Murder, and Revenge in 'Slavery's Pleasant Homes': Lydia Maria Child's Anti-Slavery Fiction and the Limits of Genre." *Women's Studies International Forum* 9.4 (1986). 323-33.

[185] See Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist.* New York: Oxford UP, 1987; Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women* New York: Doubleday, 1987.

in *Incidents*. She claims that Jacobs highlights her relationships with other women, including white women who risk real danger to offer Jacobs assistance. The narrative, Yellin maintains, "represents an attempt to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that sisterhood in the public arena" (xxxiii).[186]

Nonetheless, as strong as this call to sisterhood may be, Jacobs equally asserts the disparities between black and white women in the antebellum United States. Highlighting the inconsistent opportunities between white and black women, Jacobs lays the experience of the white sister beside that of the black sister, but no reciprocity is possible:

> I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave's heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers . . . How had those same years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink.
> In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? (29-30)

Race proves too potent. Despite the connections Jacobs's style establishes between writer and reader, and despite the form of reading as mutual recognition that *Incidents* promotes, ultimately, Jacobs is unable to imagine a successful white reading of her text. Hazel Carby makes much the same argument, saying that relationships between white and black women in the text do not lead to a form of sisterhood, but instead "involve cruelty and betrayal and place white female readers in the position of having to realize their implication in the oppression of black women, prior to

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[186] Jean Fagan Yellin, Introduction. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. By Harriet Jacobs. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. xiii-xxxiv.

any actual realization of the bonds of 'sisterhood'" (51).[187] Alternately, *Incidents* contains its own ratification in Ellen's sensitive and understanding reading of her mother's story that contrasts with the always racially inflected readings of her texts by white readers, such as Lydia Maria Child, who edits Jacobs's work, or Amy Post, who writes the appendix.[188]

Incidents seeks connection between writer and reader through a reading based in mutual recognition, but race ultimately disrupts this vision, repeating the vexed sisterhood of white and black women depicted in the narrative. The text of Brent's racialized body intercedes. For even after Jacobs has attained freedom in the North, she remains unfulfilled: "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble" (513). Jacobs's economic viability is tied to the patronage of a white woman,[189] whose husband, Nathaniel Parker Willis, a prominent magazine writer and editor, was proslavery.

Yet, the failure to connect across a wide reading audience, the failure to establish the kinds of mutually acknowledging relationships that could lead to successful reading in the sense Jacobs proposes, should not, ultimately, be read as simple failure. What *Incidents* is most instructive about is found precisely in these moments of failure. In fact, the narrative thematizes failures of a kind, and, I would argue, it is this very thematization that is Jacobs' greatest

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[187] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood.*

[188] See Hazel Carby for an examination of how differences in social status affected the relationships between Jacobs and Lydia Maria Child and Amy Post. Hazel Carby, "'Hear My Voice, Ye Careless Daughters': Narratives of Slave and Free Women Before Emancipation. *African-American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Ed. William L. Andrews. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. 59-76. See Sánchez-Eppler for a discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's racially-inflected interactions with Jacobs. Karen Sánchez-Eppler. *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

[189] Jacobs cares for the children of Nathaniel P. Willis. She works first for Mary Stace Willis, Willis's first wife, and after her death, for Cornelia Grinell Willis, his second wife. Both of the Mrs. Willises opposed slavery and tried to help Jacobs, but she never felt entirely comfortable in their home, convinced as she was of Nathaniel Willis's support of slavery. Jacobs concealed her literary efforts from the Willises.

contribution toward a critique of hegemonic reading practices. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* draws attention to failures, specifically, failures to *know,* in a way that exposes the workings of the culture at large. *Incidents* suggests a *strategy* of *unknowing* mobilized as a cultural practice of mystification, obfuscating the culture's own ideology and politics. Again and again throughout the narrative, Jacobs presents reading as a skill which hinges upon experiential knowledge. That is, the narrative posits that to read well requires experience, and more importantly, it requires that critical examination of experience that is known as analysis. But for Jacobs, this analysis of experience, this *knowing*, is often paired with or thwarted by an equally potent *unknowing* that deflects, distorts, undoes the analysis gained. Jacobs holds the mirror to antebellum America, revealing its overriding desire to remain unknown to itself.

Reading a Different Story

Prominent abolitionist**,** Lydia Maria Child, who had already received both ostracism and notoriety for her 1833 publication of *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans,*[190] writes the introduction to Jacobs's narrative. In it, Child promises to withdraw the veil from subjects "which some call delicate . . . and others indelicate," the sexual abuse of women slaves. Her goal, like Jacobs's, is to marshal the reader's support of abolition and her cooperation in aiding runaways. Yet, Child's address to the reader remains quite different than Jacobs's for several important reasons. In the first place, Child writes as white editor of the text, not as its black, runaway slave author. Child's is not the black body whose features and

[190] In response to her *Appeal*, many subscribers cancelled their subscriptions to *Juvenile Miscellany*, Child's journal. In 1834, she gave up her position as editor. See Karen Sánchez-Eppler. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." *Representations* 24 (1988): 43.

sexuality are under discussion. In the second place, there is no racial difference between Child and (the vast majority of) her readers. When Child writes that she will withdraw the veil which conceals the most "monstrous features" of slavery, she does so, she says, "for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them" (4).[191] Child's comments cue us in on at least two of the major issues which underlie *Incidents*. First, there is the issue of "sisterhood" which Child gestures towards and second, there is the question of "delicacy" as it relates to the relationships between women and their bodies, and between black and white women as "sisters," and, finally, the degree to which this "delicacy" hinders or helps women's solidarity. Jacobs's *Incidents* responds to Child's introduction by problematizing the relationship of reader to the text: How will the white reader read or understand Jacobs's pseudonymous Linda Brent and her black, slave body? How will Jacobs's construction of Brent's sexuality affect this interpretation? How will white readers adjudicate between the behavioral standards of women's decorum and the gritty realities of abuse and exploitation referenced in the text? How will the reader and writer's multiple differences (of race, class, experience) impact upon *Incidents*'s ability to forge connections between women? And, finally, what depictions of reading can *Incidents* offer that are not divided by race? Does *Incidents* depict a black reading subject?

Sandra Gunning's densely-layered "Reading and Redemption in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," looks closely at Child's positioning of Jacobs in the introduction. Gunning points out that for nineteenth century readers, Jacobs's placement in the public sphere through the pages of her narrative and the "unveiled" posture of the introduction, puts her outside the "realm of

[191] Lydia Maria Child. Introduction by the Editor. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. By Harriet Jacobs. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. 3-4.

shielding domesticity" normalized and racialized as white, feminine, and moral (136).[192] Jacobs's position in public, on the other hand, is un-feminizing and racialized as black. This positioning, Gunning maintains, confers the white reader with the authority to judge Jacobs: "By focusing on the problem of audience reception (the problem of indecorousness), Child draws attention not to the slave narrator's authority to determine the meaning of her slavery, but to the privatized privilege of the white reader to interpret and pass judgment on Brent's life and—if we follow the gist of Child's metaphor of the unveiling—on Brent's body as well" (136). Moreover, Gunning argues, in contrasting the horrors of slavery and the female slave bodies that endure it to the "ears . . . too delicate to listen" of Northern, white women readers, Child at once distances black and white women from each other and suggests that the stories of black women are better unheard. The silent black woman becomes the appropriate "object of charity" over which the "disembodied white female reader" can apply "protective moral influence" (137). But Jacobs remains unrestrained by the prescriptives of the introduction. She forges an identity for herself that uses her experience in slavery as the source, not of her contamination, but of her authority: "it is precisely Jacobs's experience as a participant (the same experience which might repulse the audience) that her preface argues is the premiere qualification for assigning her the role of judge . . . Clearly, what Child sees as the point of danger for white women becomes a source of authority for Jacobs" (Gunning 139).

Though white readings of her slave body may seek to define Jacobs strictly in terms of her slave experience, Jacobs, instead, claims that experience as a strategy to assert her authority above and beyond white readings of her victimized body. Jacobs's assumption of authoritative experience deflects the judgment of her white audience. Jacobs writes, directly addressing the

[192] Sandra Gunning. Reading and Redemption in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. *Harriet Jacobs and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 31-55.

reader of her text, "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered" (29). Jacobs hopes to affect her readers and inspire them to political action. She posits a solidarity between herself and other enslaved women. Moreover, she wants to "enflame" her readers against slavery. "Would that I had more ability," Jacobs laments, "[b]ut my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak!" (30). Emphasizing her emotional state as she writes, Jacobs seeks an immediate connection to her reader in the form of emotional response. Shared emotions—between writer and reader, and between reader and reader—become the first step, in what Jacobs, hopes, will be the reader's transformation into a political opponent of slavery.

Jacobs's mode of narration calls for emotional response, a technique which has alienated some twentieth century readers who doubted the authenticity of the narrative. Despite the sentimental narration, Claudia Tate contends that nineteenth-century African-American women's narratives are most accurately viewed as "discourses of liberation,"[193] precisely the kind of "emancipatory" reading Carla Kaplan warns against. In "Recuperating Agents: Narrative Contracts, Emancipatory Readers, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Kaplan asks, repeating the phrases of critics of Jacobs's work: "In what sense is [Brent's] miserable, wasting, wasted seven-year period a form of 'effective combat'? Do her letters really effect a 'power reversal'? Do they 'pry apart' the social system?" (287).[194] Kaplan smartly reminds us that, as readers, the text involves us in attempts to retrieve Jacob's agency: "what will it mean for us to

[193] Claudia Tate. "Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women.* Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989.

[194] Carla Kaplan. "Recuperating Agents: Narrative Contracts, Emancipatory Readers, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*" *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice.* Ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1995. 280-301.

recover or recuperate Jacob's agency when we, as readers, are problematically and unavoidably (albeit also variously and differently) implicated in the process of its construction?" (288). Kaplan's question, now fifteen years old, continues to prove fruitful for analysis because it asks us to consider not only the particular form of agency we attribute to Jacobs, but also our roles as readers of Jacobs's text. A critical, contemporary reader is as much (if not more) involved in the active attempt to retrieve Jacobs's agency, or to supplant it with our own, as was the nineteenth century reader. How, then, does the text construct us as readers? What roles does it offer us? What does it mean for us to occupy these roles or to reject them? And, what does the text suggest, is the nature of the reader's relation to the text itself?

As several critics have noted, Jacobs's narrative asserts that personal experience informs reading practice. To read well requires experience. Perhaps, Jacobs's clearest enunciation of this thesis is found in her review of Amelia Matilda Murray's *Letters From the United States, Cuba, and Canada* (1856), a proslavery account of Murray's travels through the United States. Jacobs corrects Murray's errors: "A small portion of *my* experience would enable her to read her own pages with anointed eyes. If she were to lay aside her title, and, instead of visiting among the fashionable, become domesticated, . . . she would see and hear things that would make her tell quite a different story" (185; italics in original). Jacobs contrasts her inside knowledge of the realities of slave life with the perspective of the outsider, Murray. A more intimate experience with slavery, Jacobs insists, would radically shift Murray's view, prompting her to revise, to "read her own pages with anointed eyes." Jacobs's comments underscore the extent to which reading, as a practice, both draws upon and perpetuates received notions of "the way things are," the sum total of knowledge and meaning-making practices operative in a culture at a given moment. When faced with the text of Southern slavery, Murray reads the proslavery one she

expects to find, but Jacobs counters this seeming inevitability with a first-hand experience that could offer Murray new ways of interpreting or reading slave life in the South. Moreover, in her treatment of Murray, Jacobs suggests that her experience could help Murray, not only to perceive slavery more accurately, or to better understand Jacobs's text, but to "read her [Murray's] own pages" with new eyes. That is, the slave narrator's experience serves not only to make the slave narrative more intelligible to readers, but can prompt a rereading of white-authored texts, this time with new knowledge derived from the slave experience. The result of this rereading is "quite a different story" to the one based on received notions of race.

Though the role of experience in Jacobs's concept of reading has been noted and examined by several critics, and though Jacobs's call for political action has been established, Jacobs's unique formulation of reading itself as a political process has not been explored. By throwing responsibility back on the reader the way she does in this excerpt and in other instances, Jacobs requires that readers expand their own reading practice by incorporating the knowledge and experience of others. Additionally, she expects her readers to go back to their own texts "with anointed eyes." Experience gleaned from the written word, should alter and transform a reader's viewpoint, Jacobs insists. This form of reading which requires the incorporation of both first- and second-hand experience necessarily involves the reader in a community of readers and writers. Because experience is critical to the type of reading Jacobs elaborates, and because experience is derived from the careful consideration of one's own life events as well as the life events of others, community becomes essential to the style of reading Jacobs formulates. At the beginning of the narrative, when Jacobs lays out the contrast between the life expectations of two sisters, one white and bound for happiness, the other a black slave, bound only for misery and degradation, she asks: "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye

free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?" (30). Jacobs expects that reading informed by experience will result in action. Reading is a political activity.

Reading, Difference, and (Un)Knowing

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs offers the experience that allows readers, particularly white, nineteenth-century readers, who may, like Murray, come to the text with the popular tenets of scientific racism in mind, to revise their own preconceptions about slavery, and to learn to read in new ways. What is more, Jacobs's text presents through the death scene of Aunt Nancy, a side-by-side comparison of two reading practices—one based in difference and one based in community and mutual recognition. One exemplifies the refusal to know, the other, first-hand knowledge. Each of these ways of reading represents a strain of antebellum intellectual activity. Jacobs perceptively links the concept of reading based in difference to the refusal to know or to perceive connection. Likewise, she joins the notion of reading based in identification and communal connections to knowing, such as in the sensitive and knowing reading Ellen offers her mother.

Jacobs uses the scene of Aunt Nancy's death and funeral to compare and contrast two reading styles. The first style, exemplified by Mrs. Flint and "Northern travelers," is an example of reading based in difference, based in a controlling sense of the divide between self and Other, reader and text. The scene contrasts Mrs. Flint's reading of Nancy with the reading done by Brent and her family/community, the "we," that surfaces in the text. Brent and community's reading stems from a notion of reading as a validating act of mutual recognition between reader

and text. Daneen Wardrop's "'I Stuck the Gimlet in and Waited for Evening': Writing and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*"[195] astutely connects Jacobs's rendering of this scene with her treatment of Murray. Indeed, Brent speaks of how "Northern travelers" or British ones, for that matter, might view the funeral paid for by her uncle Phillip: "Northern travelers, passing through the place, might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the 'patriarchal institution;' a touching proof of the attachment between slaveholders and their servants; and tenderhearted Mrs. Flint would have confirmed this impression, with handkerchief at her eyes" (146). An outsider, unaware of the cruelties of slavery, might view the scene in such a way, mistaking Mrs. Flint's apparent performance of emotion as the genuine thing. Brent speaks sarcastically of Mrs. Flint's "tenderhearted" tears. She contrasts these with the depth of emotion her family suffers and the way that the slave community perceives the funeral and Mrs. Flint's actions. What has thus far been a first-person singular narrative, shifts effortlessly into a first-person plural one: "*We* could have told [Northern travelers] a different story. We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings, that would have touched their hearts, if they *had* any hearts to feel for the colored people" (italics in original; 147). Twice more, Brent repeats the formulation: "we could have told . . ." It is as if the slave community, which has been present in the background of the narrative all along, but silent, suddenly finds voice and joins with Brent to correct the egregious misreading of Nancy and her death.

Anne Bradford Warner suggests that Jacobs may have written this chapter, in part, as a response to the proslavery travelogues of her employer, Nathaniel Parker Willis. Willis wrote accounts of his journeys throughout the South during the 1850s for the *Home Journal.* He

[195] Daneen Wardrop. "'I Stuck the the Gimlet in and Waited for Evening': Writing and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.3 (2007): 209-229. I owe much of my own thinking on this point to Wardrop's insights into the scene.

placated his Southern readership and misled his Northern one with descriptions of "merry black faces, with numberless ebony babies," and of "negro comfort" (qtd. in Warner). It is little wonder that Jacobs concealed her writing from him while living and working at the Willis's estate, Idlewild, in the Hudson River highlands. Warner declares: "Willis' observations about slavery in the South mirror his own complacent commentaries about the mainly African American servants that staff Idlewild. Willis' observation sustains a perverse fiction; it cannot approximate lived experience."[196] Like many Northerners only too willing to dismiss concerns about the mistreatment of blacks under slavery, Willis's articles readily perpetuate the myth of the "happy darky," child-like in his dependence, in exchange for Southern readership. Willis's articles and their uncritical distortion of reality, no doubt, contribute to the context of Jacobs's scene; Jacobs writes strenuously against such a misreading of slave life.

What is at stake in these comparisons is not only the interpretation of the trappings of Nancy's funeral, but more fundamentally, it is, as Daneen Wardrop explains, a "conflict over how best to signify the loss of Nancy" (222). Wardrop argues persuasively that "Jacobs clearly offers her reader two versions of Nancy's death, one following the other immediately in the text, so that Jacobs can present and refuse to align herself with white discourse. The side-by-side accounts occur at an advanced stage in the text, after Jacobs has realized increasingly the agency and authority of her own perspective" (222). The contrasting responses to Nancy's death, then, serve not only to point out the vast differences between the slaveholders's (or outsiders's) perspectives and the perspectives of slaves, but also to make plain the differences in the two group's uses of language and concepts of interpretation or reading. I take the time to closely

[196] Anne Bradford Warner. "Harriet Jacobs at Home in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*" *Southern Quarterly* 45.3 (2008): 30-48. ProQuest. Web. 27 October 2009.

analyze this chapter because in the contrasts between the slaveholder/slave perspectives, we can also discern Jacobs's formulation of alternate reading styles.

For example, at the first mention of Nancy's illness, Jacobs begins to draw comparisons between Mrs. Flint's false emotion and her family's genuine emotion. When Nancy dies, Mrs. Flint becomes "very sentimental" (146). Brent, on the other hand, suffers a real loss and compassionately sympathizes with her grandmother's devastation at the loss of yet another child. "To me," Brent says simply, "the death of this kind relative was an inexpressible sorrow" (Jacobs 145). Brent compares the Flints's reliance on Nancy's skill and industry as a household servant to her central role in Brent's family: "the whole family relied upon her judgment, and were guided by her advice" (Jacobs 144). In each of these instances, Mrs. Flint's view or interpretation of Nancy stems from a distancing of herself from her slave. Even when Mrs. Flint desires to bury Nancy in her family's burial place, it is with all the distinctions between slave and master in place: "I suppose she thought it would a beautiful illustration of the attachment existing between slaveholder and slave, if the body of her old worn-out servant was buried at her feet" (Jacobs 146). For Mrs. Flint, reading the text of Nancy's death, reading remains based in difference. Jacobs links this limited form of reading to a refusal to *know*, a refusal to understand, a refusal to learn from the Other's perspective and experience. Though Mrs. Flint may, with self-satisfaction, "drop a tear" at Nancy's funeral, she refuses to know or realize that she herself "had rendered her poor foster-sister childless, apparently without any compunction; and with cruel selfishness had ruined her health by years of incessant, unrequited toil, and broken rest" (Jacobs 146). More to the point, she refuses to *know* Nancy's humanity, which is exactly what Brent and her family do *know*.

Brent's view of Nancy as "the good friend who had been the comfort of my life" recognizes both her humanity and her uniqueness and serves as an example of a style of reading that is based in mutual recognition, in acknowledging the subjectivity of both self and Other (Jacobs 144). Jacobs emphasizes this mutual appreciation by depicting Aunt Nancy and Aunt Martha staring into each other's eyes at the last, but speaking not a word: "They had always been devoted to one another; and now they sat looking into each other's eyes" (144). The chapter alternates perspectives to contrast the styles of reading operative in each. When Jacobs suggests that a Northern traveler would misread the funeral, she is extending her analysis of Mrs. Flint to slaveholders in general, and, ultimately, to the nation at large. Mrs. Flint is not the only one implicated in Jacobs's critique of limiting reading practices. The reader herself is complicit in the refusal to know the slave's humanity, if, like Mrs. Flint, she accepts the status quo, accepts the legal definition of human beings as chattel, accepts the hierarchy of the "patriarchal institution." The reader, Jacobs fears, may remain very like Mrs. Flint, "probably thinking she had performed her duty nobly" and yet refusing to recognize the uncomfortable truths right before her eyes (Jacobs 146).

Jacobs's text combats this self-limiting refusal to know, the attitude of *unknowing* that characterizes the general Northern approach toward Southern slavery. Jacobs directs her text to a Northern audience, confronting their assumptions and schooling them in reading practices by offering the experiences which challenge them to read better. She does not spare the Northerner a sense of responsibility for the wrongs of slavery. In fact, Jacobs makes a point of emphasizing just how quickly some Northerners learn to apply its injustice: "When northerners go to the south to reside, they prove very apt scholars. They soon imbibe the sentiments and dispositions of their neighbors, and generally go beyond their teachers" (44). Most consequentially, though,

Jacobs repeats a pattern throughout the text which she uses to critique Northern complacency. Jacobs's primary device for this critique is the motif of the character who (un)knows some crucial piece of information.

For instance, Jacobs includes a lengthy depiction of Mrs. Flint's jealous response to her husband's infidelity. In this scene, Mrs. Flint tries to trick Brent into admitting to a sexual relationship with Dr. Flint. Mrs. Flint already knows that her husband is unfaithful. Nonetheless, she seeks confirmation of it through cruelties directed at Brent. Though Brent maintains that she has not been sexually involved with Dr. Flint, clearly, Mrs. Flint already has had experiences which lead her to doubt her husband's fidelity. By seeking for some "proof" to further corroborate that which she already knows to be so, the depiction of Mrs. Flint serves as a critique of Northerners who deny any knowledge of the injustices of slavery. Jacobs suggests that Northerners are complicit in slavery if they do not voice their objection to it, just as Mrs. Flint is partially responsible for the infidelity in her marriage since she does not directly confront her husband with his affairs, but waits instead for more evidence of wrongdoing. Furthermore, in another parallel with Northerners, Mrs. Flint directs her inquiries and persecutions against Brent, rather than her husband, the adulterer. As Brent explains, "Mrs. Flint possessed the key to her husband's character before I was born. She might have used this knowledge to counsel and to screen the young and the innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy. They were the objects of her constant suspicion and malevolence" (Jacobs 31). In choosing to blame Brent, instead of Flint, Mrs. Flint acts the part of Northerners who shirk responsibility for slavery, seeing it instead as a problem for the South or for blacks themselves to resolve.

Jacobs's construction of Mrs. Flint is not her only indictment of Northern complacency and moral hypocrisy. Before she published *Incidents*, Jacobs was an outspoken critic of

Northern credulousness to the depth of cruelty enacted under slavery. In 1853, Jacobs wrote to the editor of the *New York Tribune* challenging a recently published article which claimed that slaves were not "outlawed,"[197] in North Carolina. Jacobs provides an eyewitness account of the murder of an "outlawed" North Carolina slave, thus dispelling the inaccurate claim that "outlawing" does not occur. What is most interesting about Jacobs's letter to the editor, however, is the way she frames the eyewitness account. Firstly, she provides all of the details of the slave's capture and gruesome beheading. Then she launches into a discussion of the injustice of the slave's murder and the public adulation of his murderer as "a brave fellow." Lastly, she reveals an unexpected detail: the slave who was put to death was owned by a New Yorker, not a Carolina slaveholder. Jacobs writes, referencing the inaccurate article published in the *Tribune*:[198] "The writer of that article has said, the people of North Carolina have hearts and souls like our own. Surely, many of them have. The poor slave, however, who had his head severed from his body was owned by a merchant in New-York." By saving the detail of the New York slaveholder until the end, Jacobs maximizes the reader's surprise and shock to discover a Northerner's involvement in this most disturbing, "Southern" practice. She also signifies on the words of the *Tribune* article. It is no surprise, to Jacobs, that "the people of North Carolina have hearts and souls like our own," when Northerners are also slaveholders. She plays on the article's original meaning, that Southerners share much in common with Northerners, presumably positive traits and good intentions. But Jacobs turns the phrase to mean that

[197] A runaway slave who had concealed him or herself for the period of one year or more, was declared an "outlaw." If found, the law provided that he or she was to be killed on sight. See North Carolina law, "Slaves and Free Persons of Color. An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color, Revised code--No. 105." North Carolina, 1855. *Documenting the American South: The Southern Experience in Nineteenth-Century America*. 2002. Academic Affairs Lib., U of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Web. 3 Feb 2010.

[198] Harriet Jacobs. "Cruelty to Slaves." *New York Tribune* 25 July 1853. *Documenting the American South: The Southern Experience in Nineteenth-Century America*. 2002. Academic Affairs Lib., U of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Web. 3 Feb 2010.

Northerners's "hearts and souls" are more like the morally-contaminated Southerners's, than they care to imagine. Jacobs's letter to the editor demonstrates her longstanding frustration with the incomplete and inaccurate knowledge Northerners had about slavery and their moral self-righteousness based in ignorance. She signs the piece with the appellation, "a fugitive," emphasizing her first-hand knowledge of slavery and the experience with which she writes.

Jacobs uses the depiction of Dr. Flint's confusion after Brent escapes his household as another critique of this kind. Again, Jacobs portrays a character who simultaneously knows and doesn't know. Flint knows that Brent has escaped to freedom, but he believes she has gone North. Brent takes care to augment this misimpression by fooling him with letters mailed from the North. Hidden in the attic space above her grandmother's shed, Brent has a friend mail letters to Flint from northern addresses. His confusion and his resulting trips North to find her, apart from being a small moral victory for Brent, display again the pattern of (un)knowing that characterizes the Northern refusal to acknowledge the realities of slavery. Jacobs's text offers the antidote to ignorance that Northern audiences need. Stressing the authority of her experience, Jacobs writes:

> You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. As for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation. (52)

Emphasizing her insider's knowledge of slavery, Jacobs's experience elucidates slavery for the most self-satisfied of readers.

Sandra Gunning likewise suggests that *Incidents* sets up parallels between Flint and white, Northern, women readers. As unlikely as the pairing may seem at first glance, Gunning

maintains that the white woman reader's positioning as "too delicate" to confront the realities of sexual exploitation in slavery, makes her complicit with the southern slaveholders who perpetuate the abuse. In sacrificing honesty to delicacy, white, "true" women readers, place a "hypocritical standard of public morality" above an accurate understanding of the experiences of slave women (Gunning 141). By refusing to hear the upsetting details of slave life, white audiences require Brent to be "the guardian of the white reader's morality," to keep to herself the more disturbing aspects of her experience and force her to become "the physical receptacle of slavery's contamination," a reservoir for everything the Northern reader wants to avoid knowing (Gunning 142). This alignment of interests, a shared desire for silence regarding slave experience, between white women readers and Southern slaveholders, "recontextualizes these women's popular representation as saviors. They have, in fact, joined the ranks of Brent's male tormentors, a shift that threatens to defeminize them. . . What is at risk . . . is the very notion of femininity and true womanhood white Americans have hitherto idealized" (Gunning 142). *Incidents*, then, challenges readers to acknowledge the experiences of black slave women, for to ignore them is to risk the reader's own femininity.

Gunning's salient reading of the correspondences between Flint and the Northern reader, calls attention to the ways in which *Incidents* poses a multi-layered critique of American society. Not only does Jacobs insist on the evils of slavery and the necessity of its immediate abolition, but her text, as Gunning points out, challenges a squeamish "morality" that prefers hypocrisy to knowledge, slavery to abolition. My own argument that *Incidents* contains a motif of (un)knowing adds another dimension to Gunning's thesis.

It is important to recognize the pattern of (un)knowing in the text as a motif because, with this realization, we can become better aware of the extent to which *Incidents* problematizes

nineteenth century meaning-making/knowledge systems. Gabrielle Foreman[199] has written compellingly about the telling silences and omissions in Jacobs's text, but *Incidents* speaks not only of the difficulties of articulation of the slave experience, it also stresses the larger national desire to *unknow* its own experience. That is, Jacobs uses the depictions of the Flints to emphasize the cultural failure to "hear," to take in, or to validate the slave experience, particularly the experience of sexual abuse under slavery. The motif of (un)knowing demonstrates the cultural work that is done by the categories of knowledge we allow or disallow. To avoid the consequences of knowledge, one has only to avoid conscious knowing, conscious recognition, it would seem. The status quo can be maintained and real change averted. When Jacobs scolds, "Surely if you credited one half the truths that are told you concerning the helpless millions suffering this cruel bondage, you at the north would not help to tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which trained bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the south," she points to the willful ignorance on which the nation pivots (28).

By offering ignorance as the only possible defense against inaction, Jacobs does more than attempt to shame Northern readers into defying the Fugitive Slave Act. She highlights knowledge, and its possession or dispossession, as the foundational premise on which civilization is built. When the North "credits" the testimony of the slave, when it gives credence to the slave's account, then that knowledge becomes real and operative. But at the moment Jacobs writes, ignorance is the primary point of relation between North and South. Only by ignoring the heinous offenses of slavery and claiming ignorance of its wrongdoing, can the North

[199] See P. Gabrielle Foreman. "Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. *Harriet Jacobs and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 76-99, and Foreman, "The Spoken and the Silenced in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*." *Callaloo* 13 (1990): 313-24.

operate as the moral arbiter of the country and maintain the divisions—North/South, industrial/agrarian, utilitarian/gracious, free/enslaved, moral/immoral—that structure antebellum life. As Jacobs is well aware from her (mis)treatment in the "free states," the North has little interest in dismantling the racialism that underlies slavery. By maintaining the fictions around race, the North can continue its own discriminatory practices, to the economic, social, and cultural betterment of middle and upper class whites. Both North and South are equally implicated in the "knowledges," including scientific racism, they espouse and the cultural work such knowledge performs.

"Give Ear Unto My Speech": the Authority of Experience

Frances Smith Foster's "Resisting *Incidents*"[200] deals with (both contemporary and current) readers's resistance to the text and the depiction of slave life it offers. Foster considers each of the major barriers to reading—race, gender, economic and education levels—and concludes that for Jacobs, as well as for many other African-American authors, readers tend to react hostilely to the text: "When a readership is invited into communicative contexts with writers of a race, gender, or class that it assumes to be equal or inferior to its own, questions about authority and authenticity take on an intensity and texture that obscure other aspects of the discourse" (57). Jacobs meets this resistance, which she expects, by pitting her experience against readers's ignorance. She uses a strategy described by Robert Stepto as a "discourse of

[200] Frances Smith Foster. "Resisting *Incidents*." *Harriet Jacobs and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: *New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 57-75. Subsequent references to Foster are from this article.

distrust"—a plan of "specific narrative plottings and rhetorical strategies" that negotiate the "race rituals which color reading and/or listening" by an American audience (305).[201] For African-American authors, this means "acts of creative communication are fully initiated not when the text is assaulted but when the reader gets 'told'—or 'told off'—in such a way that he or she finally begins to hear" (Stepto 309).[202]

One of the ways, which Foster points out, in which Jacobs "tells off" her mostly Northern, white readers is through the epigraphs she selects for the text. The first, "Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of degradation involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease in their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown," is from Angelina Grimké's 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, but Jacobs identifies the quotation only as by "A Woman of North Carolina." Foster explains that in 1861, when Jacobs's narrative was published, few readers would be able to recognize the source of the quotation. Thus, Jacobs's attribution of it, as belonging to a "Woman of North Carolina" would be taken at face value. Foster goes on to explain that readers of the time would, no doubt, assume the statement was made by a white woman, and that Jacobs's use of the quotation would establish to some degree her own scholarliness and be an authorial maneuver akin to a white woman referencing a white man's text. Jacobs would thus borrow a bit of authority from the presumably white reference. But Foster sees other interpretations of Jacobs's use of the quote, as well. Because the "only women from North Carolina in Harriet Jacobs's text who exhibit the spirit and audacity of the woman quoted on her title page are black," it is possible that some readers, especially

[201] Robert Stepto, "Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives." *Reconstructing American Literary History*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986. 300-322.

[202] Stepto, "Distrust of the Reader."

African-American ones, may have believed Jacobs was quoting herself or another slave woman (Foster 71). "Such a reading," Foster declares, "would be subtly empowering" (72).

In addition to Foster's reading of the epigraph, I'd like to suggest another reading. Rather than select a quote from a Northern abolitionist, Jacobs chooses a southern-born abolitionist, whom she identifies as a woman of North Carolina; this identification does several things at once. Firstly, it undercuts the opportunity for Northern readers to bring a sense of moral self-satisfaction to the text. Readers will not find a congratulatory account of Northern resistance to slavery in this narrative. Secondly, it emphasizes the incomparable and authoritative value of *experience* in reading the text of slavery. Grimké lived in the South through her formative years; she had an insider's view of slavery, not, indeed, from the perspective of the slave, but an insider's view, nonetheless. By foregrounding Grimké's statement, but in unattributed fashion, Jacobs foregrounds not the authority of a white abolitionist, but the authority of experience. And this is the same note she sounds throughout the text. Hers is the voice of experience. Hers is the voice of knowledge. For the reader, remains only the following, the advice in the second of her epigraphs, from the book of Isaiah: "Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech."

In addition to providing readers with the vicarious experience they need to read well, Jacobs's text teaches new strategies of interpretation by challenging the codes readers already bring to the text. Jacobs addresses her readers directly, asking them to rethink the suppositions they bring to their attitudes about slavery and African-Americans: "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered since childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!"(54). As we shall see, the subject of sexual "purity" becomes the central issue of

Incidents. Unlike Douglass's slave narrative(s) which revolve around literacy and the quest for freedom,[203] Jacobs's text revolves around the fact of female sexual abuse in slavery and the choices Brent made in consequence of that abuse. This gendered difference between the two texts, results, not only in two very different accounts of "the slave's" struggle for freedom,[204] but also in very different constructions of the reader. Whereas Douglass's texts construct a male reader determined to achieve freedom through "manly" action, Jacobs's text produces a female reader whose role is relational and communal. Jacobs's motherhood is key to this formulation because her desire for freedom encompasses her children as well and Jacobs does not shrink from acknowledging the debt of gratitude she owes to the slave and freed black community (as well as to a network of white women friends of the family) who cooperated to get her safely to the North, eventually with her children.

Just as Jacobs juxtaposes two views of Aunt Nancy's funeral, to reveal the inaccuracies of reading based in difference, she likewise contrasts alternate views of what has become known as "true womanhood." Again, the style of reading based in difference will yield a limited, self-referential interpretation, but a reading based in mutual recognition could result in sisterhood and participation in community. But before Jacobs can reshape the form of reading employed by her readers, she must first disturb the habits of reading and interpretation they already apply. Next, she can begin reeducating her readers, allowing her experience to reshape the view and practice of reading that the text promotes.

Barbara Welter's trailblazing "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860" describes the nineteenth century adherence to the principles of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity

[203] This is Robert Stepto's now renown thesis. See *From Behind the Veil.*

[204] Valerie Smith contrasts Jacobs's narrative with slave narratives written by males. See Valerie Smith. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Literature.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987. 33-43.

as the defining characteristics of womanhood by the term "cult of true womanhood."[205] The movement was at its most pervasive peak[206] in the 1850s and '60s when Jacobs is writing and publishing *Incidents*. Many critics have considered the impact the concept of "true womanhood" has on the text.[207] Certainly, its presence can be felt in the text's many elisions and omissions, particularly in segments that deal with sexuality or Brent's sexual choices, but also in the "delicate" language which constrains the text.[208] "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" Jacobs writes, preparing her reader for the "headlong plunge" she took into sexual activity and relationship with a young, white lawyer, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, "Mr. Sands" in the text (55). Knowing that her unmarried sexual activity and resulting pregnancies would scandalize readers caught up in the "cult of true womanhood," Jacobs takes the opportunity to contrast her experience with that of her white readers and, in the process, school them in more appropriate standards of evaluation, more adequate ways of "reading" black, female experience:

> You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (55)

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[205] See Barbara Welter. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1976. 21-41. For a more recent reconsideration of Welter's thesis, see also, Mary Louise Roberts. "True Womanhood Revisited." *Journal of Women's History* 14.1 (2002): 150-155. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 27 October 2009.

[206] Beth Maclay Doriani emphasizes the social and cultural power of the "cult." Its behavioral standards influenced women across class and race lines. See Beth Maclay Doriani. "Black Womanhood in Nineteenth Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women's Autobiographies." *American Quarterly* 43 (1991): 199-222.

[207] Some prominent critics writing about *Incidents* and "true womanhood" are Carby, Yellin, Debra Humphreys, Maggie Sale, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Anne Dalton, Holly Blackford, Gloria Randle, and Jennifer Larson.

[208] See Yellin's introduction to the Harvard edition of *Incidents*. See P. Gabrielle Foreman's "The Spoken and the Silenced." Also, see Joanne Braxton and Sharon Zuber's "Silences in Harriet 'Linda Brent' Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Eds. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 146-55.

Jacobs's insistence that the reader at once place herself in Brent's position and realize her difference from the slave's position works to break down the reader's self-assured ways of reading. The white reader finds herself in unfamiliar racial territory, which, Jacobs suggests, the reader is unqualified to judge. John Ernest argues in *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth Century African-American Literature* that Brent must first disrupt white ways of reading by asking the reader to consider her own response to the text: "White readers must learn to read their way out of the self-fulfilling prophecies of racialized knowledge and into the world of Brent's experience. This, of course, requires a heightened state of self-consciousness, which Brent encourages by emphasizing the necessity of considering one's response to Brent's confessions" (102).[209] At the same time, however, the narrative dwells on circumstances more familiar to white, women readers from the seduction plots of sentimental novels. This simultaneous familiarity and strangeness, by introducing readers to a new perspective while not straying far from the comfortable, produces a bond of trust between reader and writer, allowing Jacobs the space to insert a different notion of reading and interpretation.

Jacobs prioritizes the authority of experience in reading and interpretation. In the chapter entitled "A Perilous Passage in a Slave Girl's Life," Jacobs juxtaposes true womanhood's self-defining concept of domesticity with the abusive, domestic situation in which Brent finds herself in Dr. Flint's household. When Flint begins to build "a small house for [Brent], in a secluded place," Jacobs knows her position to be "perilous," and the ever-present possibility of rape to be more and more likely (Jacobs 53).[210] Contrasting the protected homes of her readers against the

[209] John Ernest. *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth Century African-American Literature: Brown, Wilson, Jacobs, Delany, Douglass, and Harper.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995.

[210] Some historians, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese among them, suggest that Brent's escape from rape is probably fictive. They insist that it is more likely that Jacobs was, contrary to her representation of events, raped by Dr. Norcom, named Dr. Flint in the text. P. Gabrielle Foreman points out that the question of whether Jacobs did or did not "triumph" over Norcom by avoiding rape, illustrates Jacobs's destabilization of the concepts of virginity, purity,

"lonely cottage" that threatens Brent, Jacobs declares: "If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery" (55). Denied the protective domestic space[211] which shields and authorizes "true womanhood," Brent must, indeed, break the codes of silence which surround the subject of sexuality. She is compelled to speak out against the "demon Slavery" (54).

Brent's negotiation of the ideals of "true womanhood" offers Jacobs the opportunity to demonstrate two acts of reading that serve as models of successful reading throughout the text. The first act of reading is performed by Brent herself and the second by her grandmother. Jacobs depicts Brent as thoroughly "reading" the situation before her, considering her options, and finally planning her response. Brent is portrayed as the agent of her own decisions. "I knew

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seduction, volition, etc. She asks readers to "question the politics of transparency that often lead critics to accept Jacobs's principal script . . . and that act to quiet down a subtext which constitutes her signifying narrative success" (93). Frances Smith Foster, on the other hand, classes these responses as representative of readers's "resistance" to *Incidents*'s proud, self-confident, slave woman narrator. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1988. 392, Foreman, "Manifest in Signs," and Foster.

[211] *Incidents* undermines the concept of domesticity promulgated in the nineteenth century. Carby considers how the domestic space is transformed into a matriarchal space. Debra Humphreys argues that the domestic is compromised by Flint's sexual abuse of his women slaves. Karen Sánchez-Eppler points out that Brent "never comes to inhabit the domestic; rather, as a slave and particularly as a female slave she *is* the domestic. In her effort to escape, her body literally lines the floors and ceilings of houses, just as in servitude her body and its labor sustains the Southern home" (87). Donald Gibson compares domesticity in *Incidents* with its treatment in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative.* Mark Rifkin claims that *Incidents* politicizes the domestic space, critiquing the social functions of motherhood and home "as creatures of the state and casts them as prominent places where white privilege systemically is congealed" (75). See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Debra Humphreys. "Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narratives by Women.* Eds. Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. New York: SUNY P, 1993. 143-56; Karen Sánchez-Eppler. *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1993; Donald B. Gibson. "Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity." *Harriet Jacobs and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: *New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 156-78; and, Mark Rifkin. " 'A Home Made Sacred by Protecting Laws': Black Activist Homemaking and Geographies of Citizenship in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18.2 (2007): 72-102. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web. 27 Oct. 2009.

what I did," she says, "and I did it with deliberate calculation" (Jacobs 54). Brent explains her choice to begin a sexual relationship with Sands:

> It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion . . . I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant [, Dr. Flint]. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them, especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. (Jacobs 55)

Brent "reads" the circumstances at hand in terms of her experience with Flint and the other slave women with whom he has had relationships. Her reasoning owes much to her experience.

On one level, for the white woman reader, Jacobs's text offers little opportunity to do other than identify and empathize with Brent. As Hazel Carby argues,[212] Brent's grandmother, Aunt Martha, represents many of the ideals of "true womanhood." With Aunt Martha's incorporation in the text to mitigate the outraged feelings of "true womanhood," *Incidents* leads the woman reader, like the grandmother, to "pity" Brent: "I begged of [my grandmother] to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, 'I forgive you,' but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, 'Poor child! Poor child!'" (Jacobs 57). Just as in the death scene between Nancy and Martha, where the shared gaze symbolizes understanding and mutual recognition, Martha's look confers understanding and forgiveness. As a stand-in for the reader, Aunt Martha's initial anger with Brent transforms into sympathy when she hears the whole story. Depicted as a kind of confessor, Aunt Martha receives Brent's confession: "I knelt before her, and told her the things that had poisoned my life; how long I had been persecuted; that I saw no way of escape; and in an hour of extremity I had become desperate. She listened in silence" (Jacobs 57). Martha's

[212] Carby, " 'Hear My Voice.'" 72-75. Carby is careful to note that "the quality of conventional womanhood that the grandmother did not possess was submissiveness, and Linda Brent was portrayed as having inherited her spirit" (72-73).

silence is not the silence of distance or rejection, but the silence of sympathy and compassion. At last, Martha performs an absolution of sorts with the laying on of hands. Thus, Brent's audacious claim that "the slave ought not to be judged by the same standard as others," what Carby calls "an alternative discourse of womanhood," reads as plausible, in light of Aunt Martha's (and, ultimately, the woman reader's) acceptance (Jacobs 56; Carby 74).[213]

It is not my intention to argue that there is no alternative interpretation available here, or that every reader, of every racial and class description, becomes sympathetic to Brent at this point in the text, but, rather, to suggest that *Incidents* constructs an ideal reader in the form of Aunt Martha who guides the actual reader's response. Thus, Martha acts at once as the ideal reader, in Iser's sense of the term, and as an ideal of a reader, for Martha's reading validates Brent as a person. Martha's reading offers the mutual recognition Jacobs seeks. As a model of reading, it involves points of connection/recognition/validation between reader and text, conferring and acknowledging subjecthood in the process. It requires little imagination to understand Jacobs's yearning for acknowledgment as a subject, living as she did in a culture that defined her legally as an object and socially as a lack or absence. Articulating a sense of self against an almost overwhelming disavowal of that selfhood, *Incidents* generously inscribes the reader's subjectivity as well.

Yet, what kind of identification can there be between readers so variously positioned as they are in *Incidents*? What kind of identification between the white daughter of a slaveholder and her black, slave half-sister? What kind of identification between the comfortable, middle-class, white Northern woman reader and the working-class, former slave, narrator, Jacobs? The absolving reading of Aunt Martha and the understanding reading Ellen performs when she

[213] Carby, " 'Hear My Voice.'" 74.

confesses to knowing all about her mother's sexual history, share commonality of experience as the key to successful reading. Martha and Ellen read well because they *know,* they understand, they have experienced similar oppressions. Yet, *Incidents* avoids collapsing experience into essence. The reader can learn through another's experience, thus drawing reader and writer into community. The kind of "sisterhood" Jacobs's text articulates is not an utopian notion of social equality; her text's failure to resolve the thorny issues of women's solidarity across racial and class lines draws attention to the primary offense at the heart of the narrative: the fact of chattel slavery. Despite this fundamental obstacle, *Incidents* conceives of a community of readers with access to a shared reservoir of experience.

The "Appendix" by Amy Post which follows the narrative contains this understatement about Jacobs's text: "Her story, as written by herself, cannot fail to interest the reader" (204). As Post mentions, the narrative detailing "experiences of the present more strange than any fictions of the past," is bound to be interesting to even the most unengaged reader (204). But it is in the alternate meaning of Post's comments that we find the real revelation about the affect of *Incidents* on the reader. For in the 149 years since its publication, Jacobs's narrative has proven to be, not only *of* interest to the reader, but also *to* interest, or concern, the reader. The reader remains as strongly called to political response now as she was when Jacobs first articulated a notion of reading as experientially-informed, politically active, and communally-involved. The reader herself is just as strongly called to be transformed by and through the act of reading.

"Past All Speech": The Role of Silence in the Performance of Race in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*

What does Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) have to say about reading and race? Much, if current scholarship on the novella is any guide. In recent decades, Melville's text has been read as a commentary on his contemporary moment and as a social and political critique of romantic racialism, slavery, manifest destiny, sentimentalism, rationality, and, even, readers themselves.[214] This is a heady combination for one text to tackle, but if any seems up to the job, surely it is Melville's resonant, allusive, deeply ironic *Benito Cereno.* Given the plentitude of rigorous, insightful scholarship on the novella, there seems little left for me, or other critics, to say. Yet, this very loss of words, in the face of an overwritten text—a palimpsest of sorts—becomes, for Melville, the primary enabling structure of reading the performance of race in

[214] Though early twentieth-century criticism of *Benito Cereno* often read the text as grappling with transcendent issues like good and evil, more recent criticism has seen Melville's text as a response to his own social and historical situation. The sampling of texts cited below address multiple topics, but to class them in very broad strokes, for arguments about race and romantic racialism/sentimentalism, see Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in "Benito Cereno" and "Moby-Dick."* (NewYork: Oxford UP, 2009); Ezra F. Tawil, "Captain Babo's Cabin: Stowe, Race, and Misreading in 'Benito Cereno'" *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 8.2 (2006): 37-51; Peter Coviello, "The American in Charity: 'Benito Cereno' and Gothic Anti-Sentimentality" *Studies in American Fiction* 30.2 (Autumn 2002): 155-80; Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993); Dana Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature, 1638-1867* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); Robert E. Burkholder, ed. *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992); J. H. Kavanagh, "'That Hive of Subtlety': 'Benito Cereno' and the Liberal Hero" *Ideology and Classic American Literature* Eds. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge UP, 1986); Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York UP, 1972); see also, Carol Colatrella, *Literature and Moral Reform: Melville and the Discipline of Reading* (UP of Florida, 2002); Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999); George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). For arguments about issues of interpretive paradigms, see Shari Goldberg, "*Benito Cereno's* Mute Testimony: On the Politics of Reading Melville's Silences" *Arizona Quarterly* 65.2 (Summer 2009): 1-26; Faye Halpern, "In Defense of Reading Badly: The Politics of Identification in 'Benito Cereno,' *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Our Classrooms" *College English* 70.6 (July 2008): 551-77; Maurice S. Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy and American Literature, 1830-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005); Tuire Valkeakari, "The Politics of Perception in Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*" *Studies in American Fiction* 33 (2005): 229-51; Robert Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) 165-230.

Benito Cereno. In *Benito Cereno*, silence reveals the dialectical structure of discourse, which operates on a principle of exclusion, of difference, and parodies the very notion of a silent space, apart from discourse.

Melville highlights the layered, allusive quality of discourse, particularly antebellum racial discourse, in *Benito Cereno*. The very circumstances of *Benito Cereno*'s publication in serial form from October through December 1855 in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* demonstrate the degree to which texts exist in a kind of cultural conversation with other texts, wittingly or not.[215] *Benito Cereno* first appears in *Putnam's* one issue after an article which praised Louis Agassiz's proposed series of ten books on natural history as a "great work" that "will be hailed and fostered as a national monument of which every American will be glad and proud" (325).[216] *Benito Cereno* is published in the same issue that reviewed Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom,* a review which compares Douglass's text favorably to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852): "we confess to have read [*Bondage and Freedom*] with the same unbroken attention with which we absorbed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It has the advantage of the latter book in that it is no fiction" (547).[217] The reviewer frames Douglass's text against the wildly successful, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* because both texts deal with slavery, but also because his reading practice was so similar for each. Thus, texts relate to one another across the pages of literary magazines, as Douglass and Stowe's works demonstrate, but also in the minds of readers who draw connections between texts based on comparable

[215] Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art.* vol. 6, issues 34, 35, 36 (Oct.-Dec. 1855) New York: G. P. Putnam & Co., 1855. "The Making of America." Cornell University Library. Web. 30 October 2010.

[216] "Agassiz." *Putnam's Monthly* 6.33 (Sept. 1855): 325. "The Making of America." Cornell University Library. Web. 30 October 2010.

[217] "Douglass's Life and Bondage." *Putnam's Monthly* 6.35 (Nov. 1855): 547. "The Making of America." Cornell University Library. Web. 30 October 2010.

reading processes, possibly without reference to content. The December issue of *Putnam's* featured a somewhat satiric article titled "About Niggers" that reflects the tense political climate of 1855.[218] The article mocks threats to dissolve the Union and chides the South for its inflexible racial attitudes, but it also betrays its own racialism, exemplifying the multiple forms and degrees of racialist thought. The circumstances of *Benito Cereno*'s publication alone suggest that discourse functions precisely through this overlaying of texts, through a text's ability to repeat, comment upon, or revise the content of other texts. Yet, this is only the beginning of *Benito Cereno*'s allusive qualities.

"Strange History"

Melville's novella has its germ in the source text of the historical Captain Amasa Delano. Delano published his travel narrative, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere* in 1817.[219] Delano's *Narrative* includes an account of his 1805 encounter with the Spanish ship *Tryal* following a slave revolt aboard that left twenty-five crew and passengers dead, including the slaveholder, Alexandro Aranda. While Melville repeats large portions of Delano's *Narrative* word-for-word, imitates the captain's perspective on unfolding events and the broken structure of Delano's account—including the insertion of Cereno's deposition in a way that seems more to interrupt than resolve the action of the plot—Melville also exaggerates, develops, and alters other details that ultimately affect the ways we read the

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[218] "About Niggers." *Putnam's Monthly* 6.36 (Dec. 1855): 608-13. "The Making of America." Cornell University Library. Web. 30 October 2010.

[219] Amasa Delano, *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere[219] Comprising Three Voyages Round the World, Together With a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* Boston: E.G. House, 1817. Google Books. Web. 30 October 2010.

novella. For instance, Melville picks up on Delano's desire in the *Narrative* to be seen as heroic and benevolent. From the deposition included in the *Narrative*, we know that Delano's midshipman, Nathaniel Luther, testified that he accompanied Delano aboard the *Tryal* and stayed aboard the *Tryal* with Delano the whole afternoon. Nonetheless, Delano maintains that he was alone aboard the *Tryal*, insinuating a degree of heroism in his solitary actions. He is also eager to be perceived as compassionate, which Melville notices and develops, with a twist, in his novella. In *Benito Cereno*, Melville's depiction of Delano as generous, good natured, and above all, benevolent, challenges the effectivity of nineteenth-century sympathetic identification as a political strategy, given Delano's simultaneous romantic racialism and his comfort in antebellum hierarchies of race, gender, class, and station.[220]

Melville also alters the date of the action. Melville's story begins in "the year 1799," whereas the real-life slave revolt aboard the *Tryal* occurred in 1805. Eric Sundquist points to the changed date as evidence of Melville's desire to subtly connect the slave uprising in his tale with the start of the Haitian revolution in Saint-Domingue in 1791, a link emphasized by another of Melville's revisions, his alteration of Benito Cereno's ship's name from *Tryal* to *San Dominick* in the novella.[221] Melville's choice to set his story in 1799 and the alteration of the ship's name to *San Dominick*, suggests a way of reading *Benito Cereno*, not only in connection with the

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[220] Recent scholarship on sentiment has begun to elucidate the importance of affectivity to the politics of the antebellum period. Susan Ryan has argued that the language of benevolence becomes a major theme in both pro- and anti-slavery arguments. Glenn Hendler details how this benevolent emotion finds expression in the nineteenth century novel, structuring feeling and organizing "new social formations only then being preliminarily experienced by the audiences brought into being by the deployment of sentimental sympathy in literary form" (11). Carol Colatrella maintains that Melville critiqued the antebellum insistence on reading as a means of moral reform. See, Susan M. Ryan. *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001); and, Carol Colatrella, *Literature and Moral Reform: Melville and the Discipline of Reading* (UP of Florida, 2002). See also, Peter Coviello, Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005).

[221] Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* 140.

events Delano describes in his *Narrative*, but in relation to a longer history of slavery in the New World and of slave revolt that continues to threaten Melville's own contemporary context, as evidenced in the increasingly violent rhetoric of the politics of slavery as it expanded to western territories.[222]

Perhaps Melville's most subtle, yet important revision of Delano's text, is the use of irony in his novella. In almost every line, we find ironic double-meaning, a text that can be read on at least two levels. The foggy, gray morning which greets Captain Delano when his mate wakes him at the start of Melville's tale, is, on one level, the literal gray morning described by the historical Amasa Delano in his *Narrative*, but Melville's grayness is recast as a shadow, "foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (161).[223] The novella's irony produces a polyvalence that complicates the role of the reader in interpreting the text, but it also signifies Melville's prioritization of rereading as an interpretive strategy.

In addition to these alterations of the source text, Melville also diverges from Delano's *Narrative* more definitively. The intensely dramatic "play of the barber," in which Babo, while seeming to act the part of the faithful body servant, actually renews his threat against Cereno's life, is all Melville's own. In this scene, Babo skillfully manipulates both Cereno and Delano. Babo directly threatens Cereno's life, but his words and actions are understood differently by the bystander, Delano. From Delano's perspective, Babo appears to be both faithful and subordinate, but he is, in reality, masterfully orchestrating and dominating the scene. I will have

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[222] Eric Sundquist offers another contemporary context in which to read Melville's text, in addition to those listed above. The October 1855 issue of Putnam's, which printed the first installment of "Benito Cereno" also included an article on "The Kansas Question" which denounced the spread of slavery into the West. See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* 174.

[223] Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" 1855. *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 159-258. Subsequent references to Melville are from this edition.

more to say about Babo's performance later, but for now, it is enough to acknowledge Melville's fictionalization of the scene, his departure from the source text. Even more so than alterations in the plot, Melville's invention of this scene invests the character of Babo with a degree of intelligence and skill that was remarkable for the depiction of a black slave by a white, American writer in the 1850s. Melville's handling of Babo is one of the key features that contributes to the critical reading of *Benito Cereno* as a politically progressive, anti-slavery text,[224] and that marks a clear divergence from his source text, the *Narrative* of the historical Amasa Delano.

It is not my intention to rehearse in detail all of Melville's alterations or repetitions from the source text for *Benito Cereno*, but it is my contention that the fact that Melville chooses to retell, not just an historical event, but an historical event already chronicled by another writer, and one, too, that happens to include additional source documents—copies of depositions from the trial—points to Melville's fascination with and mobilization of the layering of discourse, particularly, as we see here, discourse about race. Melville's text, not only incorporates multiple texts—Delano's *Narrative* and trial depositions—as its sources, but includes fictionalized recreations of these texts in a format that underscores their brokenness and partiality, rather than their totality as an unified text. Moreover, Melville's novella responds, in at least two ways, to other circulating texts informing the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of his readers.

[224] There is currently near-general critical consensus that Melville's *Benito Cereno* holds both scientific racism and its more "benign" cousin, romantic racialism, up for scrutiny. Scholars continue to study and complicate the view of Melville's connections to the issues of his time. For a few of the major arguments that laid the groundwork for reading *Benito Cereno* in relation to race and the issue of slavery, see: Jean Fagan Yellin, ''Black Masks: Melville's 'Benito Cereno,''' *American Quarterly* 22 (fall 1970): 678–89; Glenn Altschuler, "Whose Foot on Whose Throat: A Reexamination of Melville's *Benito Cereno*" *CLAJ* 18.3 (1975); Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980), 19-27, 128-32; Michael Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 208-20; Sandra Zagarell, "Reenvisioning America: Melville's 'Benito Cereno'" Burkolder, ed., 127-45; Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*, 165-230; Gloria Horsley-Meacham, ''Bull of the Nile: Symbol, History, and Racial Myth in 'Benito Cereno,''' *New England Quarterly* 64 (June 1991): 225–42; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 135-82; Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*, 190-30.

First, Melville draws attention to the narrator/Delano's reading preferences and demonstrates how this reading influences his attitudes. When Delano spies a sleeping mother and child on the deck of the *San Dominick*, the narrator/Delano describes them with animal imagery as a pair of deer: "[Delano's] attention had been drawn to a slumbering negress . . . lying . . . like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked" (Melville 198). Delano's description sounds much like the ethnographic, travel literature popular at the time. The narrator refers to a sample of Delano's reading: "Ah! thought Captain Delano, these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard[225] saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of" (Melville 198). John Ledyard (1751-1789), a Connecticut-born explorer who traveled with Captain James Cook, is an interesting analogue for Delano because Ledyard wrote feelingly against the abuses of freedom he experienced during his imprisonment in Russia in 1788, yet seemed little troubled by the idea of African slavery, even when he spent time in Cairo interviewing and studying African women slaves.[226] Much like Ledyard, Delano fails to make the connection between his own desire for and appreciation of liberty and an African slave's desire for freedom. When Delano "remarks" the "negresses," he plays the amateur ethnographer, studying their habits and concluding: "He

[225] In the *Putnam's* version of *Benito Cereno*, this reference was to Mungo Park (1771-1806), a Scottish physician and adventurer who explored the course of the Niger River. Apparently, Melville confused Ledyard with Park. He corrected the reference to John Ledyard in the *Piazza Tales* (1856) edition. Published in *Putnam's* in 1855, John Ledyard wrote: "I have observed among all nations, that the women . . . are the same kind, civil, obliging, humane, tender beings. . . . They do not hesitate, like men, to perform a hospitable or generous action; not haughty, nor arrogant, nor supercilious, but full of courtesy, and fond of society; industrious, economical, ingenuous, more liable . . . to err than man, but . . . also more virtuous, and performing more good actions than he." Quoted in "American Travelers" *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 5 (June 1855): 565.

[226] See Edward G. Gray, *The Making of John Ledyard: Empire and Ambition in the Life of an Early American Traveler* (Yale UP, 2007). See also John Ledyard, *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, and in Quest of a North-West Passage Between Asia & America, Performed in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779 : Illustrated with a Chart Shewing [sic] the Tracts of the Ships Employed in This Expedition / Faithfully narrated from the original ms. of Mr. John Ledyard.* (Hartford: Nathaniel Patten, 1783). "Meeting of Frontiers" Library of Congress. May 2003. Web. 11 Nov. 2010.

was gratified with their manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them" (Melville 198). The women's fierceness is imagined as maternal protectiveness, mere animal emotion: "Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves" (Melville 198). Delano is unable to conceive that these mothers might well be "ready to die . . . or fight" for their children's physical and mental freedom, for recognition of their fully human status. When, in Cereno's deposition, it is revealed that the slave women took an active part in the insurrection, their participation in the violence challenges all assumptions about their sex. The women push for torture of the Spaniards and more murders. Moreover, "in the various acts of murder, they sang songs and danced—not gaily, but solemnly . . . they sang melancholy songs to the negroes, and . . . this melancholy tone was more inflaming than a different one would have been, and was so intended" (Melville 252). The black women are no longer examples to Delano of "naked nature . . . pure tenderness and love," but baffling illustrations of the "savagery" of their race (Melville 198).

In another instance of Delano's reading habits informing his actions, Delano watches Babo prepare to shave Cereno and he begins to muse about the "something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person" (Melville 212). Actually, this passage, and the ones I will quote subsequently, are told by the narrator, rather than Delano, but they detail what we presume are Delano's thoughts and habits, and demonstrate the degree to which, at this point in the story, the narrator's attitudes become indistinguishable from Delano's.[227] The narrator/Delano indicates his condescending view of African Americans as natural servants and suggests that the small details of manual labor happily occupy them. The

[227] Many critics have commented on the collapse of point of view between Delano and the narrator. See Tawil, "Captain Babo's Cabin," 48-51; Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*, 200; Sunquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 151; Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*, 109.

passage is worth quoting at length, as it illustrates the narrator/Delano's presumption of white superiority combined with a comfortable sense of himself as generously accommodating, liberal even:

> Most negroes are natural valets and hair dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune. . . . Captain Delano's nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. . . In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. (Melville 212-13)

Melville trenchantly connects the narrator/Delano's romantic racialism with his reading habits. Linking Cereno's evident trust in Babo to similar relationships he has read about, the narrator/Delano says: "one readily perceives why those hypochondriacs, Johnson and Byron—it may be, something like the hypochondriac Benito Cereno—took to their hearts, almost to the exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the negroes, Barber and Fletcher" (Melville 212). Dwelling on the "docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of bland attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors," the narrator/Delano widely mistakes, misreads even, the shaving scene unfolding before him (Melville 212). Babo does not prove to be "docile" or "unaspiring." His mind is not "limited," but quite capable of making quick decisions, organizing over one hundred people, and successfully fooling Delano over the course of several hours. Melville's placement of this commentary just prior to the shaving scene in which Babo skillfully performs his part, does more than simply belie Delano's racialist views. It also critiques Delano's failed reading practice.

Delano's interpretation ultimately proves inaccurate, but his reading *process* is under scrutiny here as much as his ill-judged conclusions.

Second, the narrator/Delano's racial attitudes are intricately tied to reading in other ways, as well. Melville's novella suggests a critique of other antebellum texts. Sarah Robbins, Peter Coviello, Ezra Tawil, and others have read Melville's text as a response to the romantic racialism and sentimental narration of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[228] Tawil argues that *Benito Cereno* responds to Stowe's novel, but also to traveling minstrel shows that performed an abbreviated version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The shows were even more popular than the novel, often referred to simply as "Tom-Shows."[229] Thomas Gossett estimates that fifty Americans had seen a minstrel version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for every one that read the novel, and Stowe's text was the first American novel to sell over one million copies (260; 165).[230] Tawil maintains: "If Melville is in part responding to the contemporary sensation surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in popular culture, his insistent use of the language of performance suggests, in effect, that Babo is putting on a 'Tom-Show' for Delano" (46). In this way, Melville refers to a discourse of unconscious racism, but revises its pretensions by equipping the slave Babo with the literacy to manipulate Delano's poor reading strategies, and through Delano, his own white, American readership.

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[228] Sarah Robbins argues that Melville's readers would have read *Benito Cereno* in relation to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* given the fact that Stowe's novel was under frequent discussion in *Putnam*'s during the timeframe Melville's novella was serialized there. Peter Coviello contends that Melville's concern about reading finds expression in his critique of sentimentalism. Ezra Tawil expands Robbins' argument to include internal evidence from the text. See Sarah Robbins, "Gendering the History of the Antislavery Narrative: Juxtaposing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and 'Benito Cereno,' *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*" *American Quarterly* 49 (1997): 531-73; Peter Coviello, "The American in Charity"; Ezra F. Tawil, "Captain Babo's Cabin."

[229] Tawil makes this argument in the essay, "Captain Babo's Cabin," but for more information about minstrel shows, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1986).

[230] Thomas Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1985).

To some extent, Delano's inability to read the scenario he is faced with, point to limitations in the way he reads. Delano reads, literally, in black and white: "The whites . . . by nature, were the shrewder race. . . But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?" (Melville 201). Allan Moore Emery argues that *Benito Cereno* alludes to and is critical of Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind*, published the year prior to Melville's text (322-24).[231] Delano mimics the assertion of white racial superiority found in Ethnographic discourse. His reiteration of the major arguments of antebellum Ethnography—race as a natural category, raced bodies as having specific, racial characteristics, the races as separate species—acts in much the same way gender operates, according to Judith Butler. Butler describes gender as a "citation," a repetition of acts "within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33).[232] As I argued in chapter one, we see much the same dynamic at work in Ethnographic literature. Race is performative in the sense that it becomes discernable as a category over time, through the repetition of specific ideas, tropes, and "scientific" claims. Delano reads the performative of race to reassure himself of a social order based on racial and class hierarchies. When Delano doubts Cereno's account of the ship's history, he begins to imagine that Cereno is "[s]ome low-born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee," but quickly changes his mind when he looks closely at Cereno's features: "he was struck by the profile, whose clearness of cut was refined by the thinness, incident to ill-health, as well as

[231] Allan Moore Emery, "The Topicality of Depravity in 'Benito Cereno'" *American Literature* 55.3 (1983): 316-61.

[232] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

ennobled about the chin by the beard. Away with suspicion. He was a true off-shoot of a true hildago Cereno" (Melville 186; 187). Delano reads Cereno's profile, an act which recalls phrenology's racialized penchant for reading heads. Cereno's profile restores Delano's faith in the legitimizing power of whiteness and class to resolve questions of status and station.

Several critics have read *Benito Cereno* as a response to other antebellum texts. H. Bruce Franklin reads Melville's Benito Cereno as "the ghost of Charles the Fifth" and William Stirling's *Cloister Life of the Emperor Charles the Fifth* (1851) as an important source text for the novella (51).[233] Sterling Stuckey suggests that Melville reworked Joseph Dupuis' racialist *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (1824) to create the African king, Atufal, and to incorporate Ashantee cultural influences into the text.[234] Melville also makes use of metaliterary themes. Tawil points out that Melville describes Delano as "incapable of satire or irony," a characterization that is unusual in that "'satire' and 'irony' typically denote not dispositions but modes of language" (Melville 184; Tawil 43). Dana Nelson, Carolyn Karcher, and, more recently, Peter Coviello, demonstrate Melville's use of gothic tropes in *Benito Cereno* and his coy and repetitive wielding of the words "plot" and "design" to suggest both concealed intent and literary composition.[235]

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[233] H. Bruce Franklin, "'Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command': Melville's *Benito Cereno*" *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno Ed. Robert E. Burkholder (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992) 50-57.

[234] Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art.*

[235] See Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*, 128-30; Karcher, "Riddle of the Sphinx," 220; Coviello, "The American in Charity." Though Sundquist does not explicitly connect Melville to literary Gothicism in *To Wake the Nations*, he does explore *Benito Cereno* in the context of Catholic despotism and the initiation of New World slavery, see p. 135-54.

Black-Letter Text and Reading in the Open Margin

Among the gothic themes Melville employs, the strongest is no doubt the pervasive sense of mystery or concealment that troubles alike Delano's interpretation of the people and events on the *San Dominick* and the reader's interpretation of *Benito Cereno.* Melville details the "enigmas," "portents," and "ugly misgivings" that confuse Delano: "passing from one suspicious thing to another, his mind revolved . . . strange questions" (Melville 190). Still, Delano's mystification goes deeper than mere puzzlement. There seems an almost supernatural quality to Delano's confusion, as if something more than misapprehension is at work: "trying to break one charm, [Delano] was but becharmed anew" (Melville 200). Peter Coviello asserts that Melville uses gothic tropes to critique, not only the narration of sentimentalism, but the reading modes sentimentalism inspires and its politics of easy, self-satisfied identification.

Silence functions to further the mystery of the *San Dominick.* In addition to the many odd occurrences Delano notes, the silences, pauses, and withdrawn, whispered conferences between Cereno and Babo, contribute tremendously not only to Delano's confusion, but to the gothicism of the tale. Silence operates in the novella to structure the narration in a way that emphasizes breaks, gaps, and discontinuities. Delano is not the only one who has trouble reading the events aboard ship. As readers, we are necessarily drawn into Delano's perspective through the narration of the novella, but even to the degree we resist Delano's oversimplifications and distance ourselves from his conclusions, we still find ourselves a muddle, for the text defies easy interpretation. Especially on a first read, it is difficult to know precisely what is happening on the ship. Robert Levine underscores the thematic importance of this disturbing first read and the extent to which *Benito Cereno* aligns readers with Delano's misinterpretations. He maintains that "no matter how many 'clarifying' hints are offered over the course of the narrative, it simply

is impossible to be absolutely certain about what is going on aboard the *San Dominick* until events have completely unfolded" (Levine 200).[236] What is more, the silences and gaps in *Benito Cereno* do not exemplify a *lack* of detail, but are themselves details that unsettle reading. That is, the confusion that the text produces does not simply deceive us, but challenges us to consider our own reading practices.

While Levine is correct to insist that we not minimize the unsettling effects of *Benito Cereno*'s narration and while Coviello's reading is persuasive and suggestive, what strikes me as most intriguing about Melville's disorienting narrative mode and his deployment of gothic tropes, is the use of silence as commentary on the layers of talk within (and without) the text. Silence, in *Benito Cereno,* becomes, not a space removed from which to "talk back" to the prevailing discourse, but a mockery of the concept of a space apart. As such, silence critiques an identificatory reading strategy that elides difference, the foundational premise of discourse. In *Benito Cereno,* we see Melville's endorsement of irony, of double meaning, of polyvalence, of "tautology," as Sundquist would have it,[237] as a means of resignifying a discourse one cannot escape. If Melville supports any reading strategy[238] then, it is rereading, encountering the text, not anew, but precisely over and over again.

Faced with an unsettling reading experience, even Delano, ever hasty to come to comfortable conclusions, acknowledges a time to forestall interpretation when he decides not to

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[236] Robert Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*.

[237] See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 155.

[238] Samuel Otter, John Carlos Rowe, Stephen Railton, Gillian Brown, and Ann Douglas have produced influential critical accounts of Melville's relationship to his audience, though with regard to other texts or in different context than discussed here. See Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* 208-54; John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Stephen Railton, *Authorship and Audience: Literary Performance in the American Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 178-201; Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 135-69; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 289, 289-329.

engage in “ungenerous surmises” about Cereno: “to the Spaniard’s black-letter text, it was best, for awhile, to leave open margin” (Melville 187). Of course, Delano frames this temporary obeisance of interpretation through the language of benevolence and generosity, an admission which reveals an American tendency to obscure the structures of domination foundational to slavery, the repression of women, and class hierarchies, at home, and American imperialism abroad, under a language of moral righteousness (the “generous Captain Amasa Delano” of the deposition, “incapable of sounding . . . wickedness” and “unwilling to appear uncivil even to incivility itself”), but even more than betraying his expressive and interpretive paradigm, this passage suggests a way of reading that stays in-process, resisting foreclosure (Melville 253; 189). Delano describes Cereno as a form of gothic type, literally difficult to read, a suitable comparison given the scant and strained opportunity he’s had to get to know Cereno, but it is the second half of the analogy that is most interesting. Melville sets up Cereno himself as a text for Delano’s reading, making yet another allusion to the proliferation of texts, the density of discourse, but also calling attention to the reading of the body and to the body’s substantiation through discourse. That is, Cereno’s body is produced as a “gothic” text through Delano’s reading, as much as through his own actions. For example, Cereno as “black-letter text” intimates a larger discourse of racialism that informs Delano’s interpretive practice and, most consequentially, the institution of slavery and its systematic forms of domination. The Spaniard Cereno is not literally a *black*-letter text, but rather a “pale” one, as Melville emphasizes, exemplified by the white skeleton Babo places as the figure-head on the ship and successively shows to the Spanish sailors, asking each in turn: “whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white’s” (Melville 245). To “leave open margin,” suggests

a process of reading that may avoid, or at least hold in check, the regulating effects of discourse by resisting a mode of interpretation based in (racial) difference.

But *Benito Cereno* produces this "open margin" as illusory and silence serves as the key to the operation of a discourse of difference and its performance of race. The silences which permeate and structure the novella, indeed, even the gaps and lapses in the deposition and in the original historical record, have been noted and examined by scholars. Harold Scudder was among the first to point out Melville's appropriation of Delano's *Narrative*.[239] Yet, if anything, Melville's reworking of Delano's *Narrative* highlights the gaps and lapses of history more so than its ability to reconstruct the past, as Shari Goldberg explains: "*Benito Cereno* as a whole comes to seem less like a text in need of substantiation and more like an exercise in disturbing that very premise" (7).[240] When Delano asks Cereno for an account of the ship's recent trials, he is met with hesitancy, pauses, and evasive comments that, on a second reading, underscore the inadequacy of language to account for the past, particularly a violent or traumatic past. Delano refers to Cereno's pretended account of the ship's losses in a bad storm when he sympathizes: "Those must have been hard gales, Don Benito" (Melville 209). Cereno replies, "Past all speech" (Melville 209). But what *Benito Cereno* here emphasizes is not so much the inadequacy of language to capture the texture of a traumatic experience, but precisely discourse's ability to produce an event, even if it is produced as "past all speech." In other words, *Benito Cereno* challenges the notion of an "open margin" or a space outside discourse for, the novella uncovers

[239] Scudder, Harold. "Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Captain Delano's Voyages." *PMLA* 43 (1928): 502–32. See also, Margaret Jackson, "Melville's Use of a Real Slave Mutiny in 'Benito Cereno'" *CLA* 4 (I960).

[240] Shari Goldberg, "*Benito Cereno's* Mute Testimony: On the Politics of Reading Melville's Silences" *Arizona Quarterly* 65.2 (Summer 2009): 1-26.

that discourse is exactly suited to the expression, even production, of race and the institutionalization of difference.

Cereno's conception of the horrors of slave insurrection as "past all speech" points to the binary structure of discourse, as it is here deployed: speech and silence. Alterations between speech[241] and silence organize the exchange of conversation and are crucial to the narration of Melville's text, which relies so heavily on a story "very brokenly delivered," and on the play of silence and speech in secrecy (Melville 174). According to the logic of this binary then, silence marks off the boundaries of speech, while speech, in its contrast, determines the space of silence. The idea that opposites play off of one another, defining the parameters of their rivals, is not so much the point here as is the acknowledgment that silence, in the case of Melville's text, can only be produced with recourse to speech/writing. Melville shows himself well aware of this dialectic when he depicts Delano's suspicions as resolved by the very situation which provoked them: "the same conduct, which, in this instance had raised the alarm, served to dispel it" (Melville 192). Turning on an inverse relation in both cases, *Benito Cereno* deploys the dialectic to act out the production of silence through discourse, where silence is narrated as a mode of speech. Babo responds to Cereno's "story and panegyric" with a "dusky comment of silence" (Melville 216). The narrator's repetitive description of muteness points to his construction of silence as failed speech, rather than a simple quiet. Cereno's silences are performed as dramatic pauses and coughing and fainting attacks that signify his discomfiture:

> Don Benito faltered; then, like some somnambulist suddenly interfered with, vacantly stared at his visitor, and ended by looking down on the deck. He maintained this posture so long, that Captain Delano, almost equally disconcerted, and involuntarily almost as rude, turned suddenly from him . . . . Here there was a

[241] In another context, Mary Bercaw Edwards describes an oral context for Melville's work and points to the importance of talk to Melville development of characters. See Mary Bercaw Edwards, *Cannibal Old Me: Spoken Sources in Melville's Early Works* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2009).

> sudden fainting attack of his cough, brought on, no doubt, by his mental distress. . . .The Spaniard proceeded, but brokenly and obscurely, as one in a dream. . . . His cough returned and with increased violence; this subsiding, with reddened lips and closed eyes he fell heavily against his supporter. . . . Don Benito reviving, went on . . . . Here again he fell faintly back. Again his mind wandered; but he rallied, and less obscurely proceeded . . . . Once more the faintness returned—his mind roved—but, recovering, resumed . . . (173-76)

In this way, silence is figured as being "outside" of language, as a disruption of speech, but produced as such within language.

The concept of performativity offers a way of reading the productive silences of *Benito Cereno*. Melville illuminates the performative power of narrative. In one of the many instances where Delano rehearses in his mind alternate explanations of the disarray he finds on the San Dominick, he worries:

> . . . might not that . . . Spanish crew, alleged to have perished off to a remnant, be at that very moment lurking in the hold? On heart-broken pretense of entreating a cup of cold water, fiends in human form had got into lonely dwellings, nor retired until a dark deed had been done. And among the Malay pirates, it was no unusual thing to lure ships after them into their treacherous harbors, or entice boarders from a declared enemy at sea, by the spectacle of thinly manned or vacant decks, beneath which prowled a hundred spears with yellow arms ready to upthrust them through the mats. Not that Captain Delano had entirely credited such things. He had heard of them—and now, as stories, they recurred. (Melville 191)

Delano draws on the "stories" he has heard—of violence, treachery, and piracy— to help him make sense of a mysterious situation. When contradictions provoke Delano's suspicions, he falls back on texts he has previously consumed to help him make sense of what is occurring before him. For instance, when Delano imagines that "under the aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be couched," he finds "[f]rom no train of thought did these fancies come; not from within, but from without; suddenly, too, and in one throng" (Melville 185). Explanations arrive, ready-made to his mind, as long as he draws upon the texts available to him through discourse. Thus, the "stories" Delano takes in, whether "heard" or read, become central

to the reading strategies he employs when faced with an unfamiliar text. In the passage quoted at length above, Delano tries to distance himself from stories that are, he imagines, excessive to the context. Yet, what is noteworthy here is that the stories are not simply recalled as background matter for his interpretations, but rather, the stories "recur." That is, they *happen* once more. Unbeknownst to Delano, he is in the midst of a similar such story of treachery and insurrection. In this excerpt, the stories operate both as actions/occurrences in the present and as textual context for Delano's reading. As such, the stories are performative.

Delano's performative reading, then, materializes the text. What I mean to suggest is that Delano's reading strategy, though it does not *cause* events to unfold in a particular way, does, indeed, *read* them in particular ways. Delano is here looking for a "treacherous" text filled with "dark deeds" and racialized "yellow arms" and in *Benito Cereno*, this is precisely the text he reads, belatedly perhaps, in "a flash of revelation": "now with scales dropped from his eyes, [Delano] saw the negroes . . . with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt" (Melville 233). In direct correlation to the "stories" that earlier "recurred," Delano now sees the negroes as pirates, despite the fact that piracy is normally understood as a mercenary crime. The slaves' revolt, on the other hand, has several other likely motives having more to do with a desire for freedom, self-determination, or bodily integrity. Though Delano's reference to pirates may not be apt, strictly speaking, they are significant in that they frame the slaves' uprising as criminal and fearful. Delano's reading alludes to the Malay pirates of popular travelogues, but it's "hatches and knives" also suggests unsaid references to the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey's revolts and more contemporaneously to Melville's readers, the Nat Turner uprising and the mutiny aboard the *Amistad*.[242]

[242] See Sundquist *To Wake the Nations*, 157-64, 182; Carolyn L. Karcher "The Riddle of the Sphinx."

Delano's performative readings often produce a racialist text. In the shaving scene, Melville narrates a silence that is at once "sinister" and "sociable" and in this muteness, Delano reads a racialized text (Melville 229; 210). Melville dwells on Babo's preparation of the razor blade, particularly on his choice to glide the blade over his bare skin and then raise it above Cereno's neck:

> The preliminaries [of shaving in the Spanish style] being somewhat novel to Captain Delano, he sat curiously eyeing them, so that no conversation took place, nor, for the present did Don Benito appear disposed to renew any.
>
> Setting down his basin, the negro searched among the razors, as for the sharpest, and having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly strapping it on the firm, smooth, oily skin of his open palm; he then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbing among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard's lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered; his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather, which lather, again, was intensified in its hue by the contrasting sootiness of the negro's body. Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free.
>
> Meantime [the smock over Cereno slipped off, revealing it to be the flag of Spain.]
>
> "Don Benito, this is the flag of Spain you use here. It's well it's only I, and not the King, that sees this," he added with a smile, "but"—turning towards the black—"it's all one, I suppose, so the colors be gay;" which playful remark did not fail somewhat to tickle the negro. (Melville 214)

The passage displays how Delano's mode of performative reading can produce competing texts. At first Delano sees Babo as a "headsman," but then "regulates" his mind to, what he deems, is a more appropriate text, a "good, blithe," "genial" racialism. When Babo suggests that Delano accompany them to the cuddy, and Delano sees "the colored servant, napkin on arm, so debonair about his master, in a business so familiar as that of shaving, too, all his old weakness for

negroes returned" (213). Hence, when Babo uses the flag of Spain as a smock, Delano can only read it as an example of, what he maintains is, "the negro's" attraction to bright colors. Cereno reads the scene quite differently, however: "Don Benito faintly shuddered" (Melville 214). Babo's smile at Delano's comment performs a doubled reading of his own. On the one hand, Babo's performative reading of Delano's racialist remark furthers Delano's ability to see him as simple and unaffected, unaware that Babo has surely used the flag intentionally. On the other hand, Babo's "tickle" literally mocks Delano and his presumption of sophistication and mental superiority. Babo's handling of the razor, "the steel glanced nigh the throat" of Cereno, is his unspoken response to Delano's easy assumption of physical security (Melville 214).

Silence speaks in other ways in this text, as well, but particularly, through the body. Silence is contagious, moving from one character to another (Melville 185). It is "sinister" (Melville 229). Silence is expressed in "signs," between characters that sometimes go amiss or unrecognized (Melville189). It is the space of confusion, where Delano spends much of his time "turning over and over, in a purely speculative sort of way, some of the . . . peculiarities of the captain and crew" (Melville 205). Silence is overwhelmed: "too much overcome to speak" (Melville 230). For Cereno, silence is complete, inviolate, while yet "speaking" of violation: "Yan was the man who, by Babo's command, willingly prepared the skeleton of Don Alexandro, in a way the negroes afterwards told the deponent, but which he, so long as reason is left him, can never divulge" (251). Silence's particular bodily connection[243] suggests silence is not just

[243] Matthew Rebhorn claims that Melville makes use of the concept of the "embodied mind" to critique objectivist, rationalist reading practices and suggest, instead, a recalibration of the body away from the Cartesian mind/body split and the privileging of mind over body. Rebhorn argues that with *Benito Cereno*, Melville posits the body's nonverbal communication as a means of rethinking the ways we read and write. See Matthew Rebhorn, "Minding the Body: *Benito Cereno* and Melville's Embodied Reading Practice" *Studies in the Novel* 41.2 (Summer 2009): 157-77.

lack of sound, but lack of talking as the frequent references to muteness attest.[244] Cereno is depicted from the start as one who suffers "debility . . . bodily and mental" (Melville 168). His body betrays "an absent or moody mind": "[Cereno] moved slowly about, at times suddenly pausing, starting, or staring, biting his lip, biting his finger-nail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard" (Melville 169). Along with these bodily manifestations of a mind "unstrung," Cereno's manner is halted, withdrawn, and prone to long silences in his speech. Again, his body registers the "symptoms": "[Cereno's] voice was like that of one with lungs half gone—hoarsely suppressed, a husky whisper" (Melville 169). Cereno is described as an "undemonstrative invalid gliding about, apathetic and mute" (Melville 171). Thus, silence is embodied and physical action determines the contours of the silence: "'How like a mute Atufal moves'" (182). Muteness does not normally convey a particular sense of movement, yet here the movement of muteness is emphasized.

Yet, ultimately, silence functions as a parody of the notion of escape, of the concept of a space "outside" of discourse. Of all the many occasions of silence in *Benito Cereno*, the most evocative silence is surely the "voiceless end" of Babo: "As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (Melville 258). Babo's silence is historically appropriate, given that slaves were by law forbidden to testify in court, even in their own defense. The historical Babo was actually killed when Delano's American sailors took back the

[244] Shari Goldberg makes a similar point when she emphasizes the interruption of speech: "The expression of the pregnant possibility of speech that does not culminate in articulation is in fact endemic to the text, not only because 'mute' is repeatedly invoked, in similar capacities, but because the text's entire structure turns upon just such undelivered suggestions (9). See Goldberg, "*Benito Cereno's* Mute Testimony."

Tryal. Hence, Babo was never tried or executed by the state, though five others were beheaded and had their heads put on display in the port city of Talcahuano (Sundquist 175-76). Melville's choice to narrate Babo's execution then and his casting of Babo as silent underscores that the "slave, Melville seems to be telling America, has yet to be heard from" (Adler 89).[245] Yet readings of Babo, "from the perspective no longer of the masters, but of the slaves" or that claim to represent Babo as "a voice from beyond the grave" may miss the point (Karcher 197; Downes 482).[246] Babo's silence, Shari Goldberg states concisely, indicates "precisely the slave's exclusion" (Goldberg 14).[247] Babo's exclusion (and Atufal's, and Lecbe's, and Francesco's, and Yan's, and José's, and so forth, and all of the unnamed women and children's), his very muteness in a trial for his life, lights up in blazing letters, precisely "no sound," no utterance, because there is no word Babo can say that is not already overwritten by a discourse of difference, exclusion, subjection, and race. If Babo were to write a text, such as the agreement he draws up between the mutineers and Cereno to take them to Senegal or, for instance, his laughter in response to Delano's condescending remark that he has wrapped Cereno in the Spanish flag because he likes bright colors, the text would be disregarded or misread. In each case, the layering of racialist discourse would not only dull his point, but make it unreadable, as

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[245] Joyce Sparer Adler, "Benito Cereno: Slavery and Violence in the Americas" *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno. Ed. Robert E. Burkholder (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992) 76-93.

[246] Karcher, "The Riddle of the Sphinx" *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno. 196–229; Paul Downes, "Melville's 'Benito Cereno' and the Politics of Humanitarian Intervention" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 465-88. See also Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Sandra Zagarell, "Reenvisioning America: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" *Critical Essays on Herman Melville's* Benito Cereno 127–45.

[247] Shari Goldberg, "*Benito Cereno's* Mute Testimony."

Douglass once said of white America: ‘‘you shut our mouths, and then ask why we don't speak."[248]

Babo's severed head, "that hive of subtlety" that meets "unabashed the gaze of the whites" is a parody of the very idea of escaping this stifling discourse (Melville 258). Silence and the notion of an "open margin" perform the organization of discourse through a binary structure: speech and silence, inner and outer, white and black, etc. Because it makes plain the organization of discourse according to a principle of difference, where the "outside" or silence circumscribes discourse exactly as that which is central and "inside," and where the "outside" itself (and, indeed, the "inside") is produced as a category of this division, Babo's muteness mocks the concept of an "outside" to discourse. Though Babo seems to remain "outside" language in his silence and though we may care to read his refusal to be contained "within" discourse as a subversion of sorts, his body is "dragged to the gibbet," "burned to ashes," the head "fixed on a pole in the Plaza" (Melville 258). In the last lines of the novella, Babo has assumed a rhetorical "gaze," an opportunity to look back at the whites who would "see" his body according to the visual text of racial difference, but when Babo "looked towards . . . the recovered bones of Aranda: and across the Rimac bridge looked towards . . . Benito Cereno," he is already dead and there is no more intelligence animating the gaze (Melville 258). Nonetheless, Cereno, on some level, has felt Babo's metaphorical gaze. When Delano tries to cajole Cereno out of his dark mood, the narrator says: "'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" "'The negro,'" Cereno replies. The narrator continues: "There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall" (Melville

[248] Frederick Douglass, ‘‘The Church and Prejudice’’ 1841. *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume 1: The Early Years, 1817–1849* Ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 104.

257). Cereno's response to the "shadow" of the negro is more silence. Also bound by the structure of difference that binds Babo's body and bounds his words, Cereno can do no more than produce silence, as does Babo, a textual effect, a silence produced within discourse. Yet Babo's "voiceless end" is not entirely disabling (Melville 258). Melville gives the last word to Babo, echoing the one text— "[r]udely painted or chalked . . . along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas . . . the sentence, '*Seguid vuestro jefe,*' (follow your leader)"—written in violence, with which his white audience cannot refuse to reckon (Melville 165).

Unsettled Reading and the Performance of Race

Melville's novella, read as political critique, does more than criticize a particular set of politics or policies, but challenges the very notion of political action,[249] of transcendence of the status quo, or rather, reinforces the site of politics precisely as an exchange of power within existing social structures and discourse. If, then, Melville's "discourse about discourse" is despairing about an author's ability to transgress or subvert the discursive economy, it does imagine different possibilities for the reader (Kavanagh 357).[250] A text frequently read as Melville's indictment of nineteenth-century reading practices, it is also an endorsement of reading's crucial political importance. Like Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Douglass's autobiographies, and Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Melville's *Benito*

[249] See Maurice Lee's fine and much more thorough discussion of Melville's politics in *Benito Cereno*, where he argues: "'Benito Cereno' richly describes the expanding reach and limited grasp of a fearfully politicized language. It quietly constructs a political philosophy beneath the *San Dominick*'s events to suggest that America's political estate is, in fact, a world of lies. Marice S. Lee, "Melville's Subversive Political Philosophy: 'Benito Cereno' and the Fate of Speech" *American Literature* 72.3 (Sept. 2000): 495-519.

[250] J. H. Kavanagh, "'That Hive of Subtlety.'" Eds. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge UP, 1986)

Cereno perceives reading as a variously enabling strategy of ideological practice. That is, for each of the authors considered, reading becomes a site of contestation for different means of mediating the gap between reader and author/text.

Poe's *Pym* struggles with the possibilities reading offers for garnering subjectivity, not as a founding principle of identity, but as a strategy of being. My reading of *Pym* suggests that while the text illustrates (in, perhaps, unintended fashion) the principles of exclusion and difference on which race is based, it relies precisely on a notion of reading grounded in difference to effect its own exclusion of the Other.

Douglass reads from the position of the Other, which he claims as a self and as a man. Though perhaps Douglass's politics are somewhat more optimistic for the possibility of coalition and social progress, he shares with Melville a sense of boundedness within texts.[251] For Douglass, reading is always a form of writing or rewriting, a resignifying that can prompt a different kind of reading. Jacobs' *Incidents* explores the possibilities of coalition and community. Her text strives to form connections with readers across the lines of race and class and makes use of sentimentalism's narrative technique to affect a strategy of reading through identification. Ultimately, however, *Incidents* rejects the possibility of widespread coalition while race and chattel slavery divide black and white sisters from each other.

Because race itself is a discursive text, reading is crucial, not only to the representation, but also to the structure of race. Reading is more than a metaphor, but the very method of perception, the means by which race becomes discernable, and, in this discernment produces the

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[251] For a series of essays about the relationship/connections between Douglass and Melville's work, see Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter, eds. *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation* (U of North Carolina P, 2008).

contours of race. The unsettled and unsettling reading these texts problematize insists that reading is not simply a link along the chain of discursive regulation, but a key site of possible disruption. Though each of the authors studied understand these possibilities with different effects and different activations, they write a common story of the reader's importance and of the performative power of reading.

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